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The saint MYSTERY MAGAZINE

FEB.
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Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

IN THIS ISSUE

EDGAR ALLAN POE

ORSON WELLES

WILLIAM IRISH

NICHOLAS BLAKE

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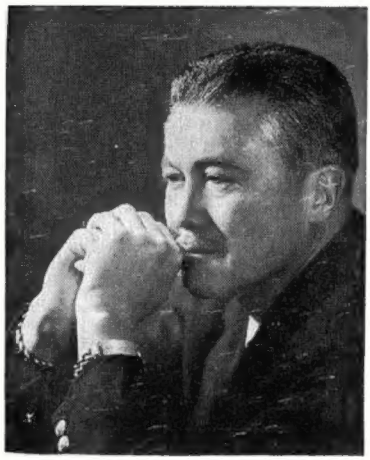
instrument of death

A New Story by WENZELL BROWN

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION



Unquestionably one of the most awe-inspiring gizzmos of our time is the Computer. which seems to be capable of figuring rings around the human brain in every field from calculating the trajectories of space rockets to predicting the result of an election before most of the voters have even reached the polls. Most of us haven't even the vaguest idea how it works, but we haven't questioned its infallibility and potential scope. We have practically been conditioned to believe that it is only a matter of time, to permit sufficient programming, before computers will be able to take over the management of every human activity as efficiently as they can supervise an assembly line.

Their masters, meanwhile, in lighter mood, have also taught them such trifling relaxations as how to play tic-tac-toe: although in the end I suppose this can only lead to something as grim as developing one into an unbeatable chess champion.

I discovered another of these temporarily flippant applications the other day, in the shape of a junior Univac installed at a supermarket, which for 50 cents undertook to analyse your handwriting with electronic authority. The operator put my signature into one machine, which rapidly sorted a handful of punched cards from a large deck. He fed these into a second machine, which buzzed and clattered and shortly regurgitated the following typed interpretations:

YOU ARE MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY ACTIVE
YOUR OPTIMISM IS STIMULATING
HANDWRITING SHOWS GREAT PRIDE IN YOUR WORK
SINCERE CHARACTER AND STRONG CONVICTIONS
WIDE INTEREST AND CURIOSITY
AN IMPORTANT ASSET IS YOUR COOLHEADEDNESS
SERIOUS MINED (sic) AND YOU MASTER SELF CONTROL

Now before any of my personal acquaintances start to take issue, let me repeat that these are not my statements, but the statements of a machine bearing the insignia of Remington Rand. So any argument should be addressed to them. For my part, I was irresistibly inspired to submit a specimen signature of my trusted colleague Hans Stefan Santesson, who does the hard work in this team. And thus spake the electrons:

YOU HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR AND EASY MANNER
YOU LOVE TRAVEL AND AMUSEMENT
AMBITION SPURS YOU ON TO GREAT HEOGHTS (sic)
YOU HAVE EXTREMELY GOOD TASTE JUDGEMENT (sic)
YOU ARE HONEST IN MONEY DEALINGS
YOU ARE NOT STINGY AND CHEERFULLY MEET COSTS

It was reassuring to find that the machine could so accurately spot the qualifications of a good Editor —who could also give it spelling lessons.

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vendetta for the saint

by Leslie Charteris

III: How Simon Templar hired a Museum Piece, and Gira Destamio became Available.

His decision made, Simon Templar intended to pay his call on the Destamio manor with the least possible delay — figuring that the faster he kept moving, the more he would keep Destamio off balance, and thus gain the more advantage for himself. But to make himself suitably presentable, his slashed jacket first had to be repaired.

The cashier directed him to the nearest *sartoria*, where the proprietor was just unlocking after the three-hour mid-day break. After much energetic and colorful discussion, a price was agreed on that made allowance for the unseemly speed demanded, yet was still a little less than the cost of a new coat. Half an hour was finally set as the time for completion; and the Saint, knowing that he would be lucky to get it in three times that period, proceeded in search of his next requisite.

The tailor directed him around the next corner to where a welcoming sign announced *Servizo Eccellento di Autonoleggio*. But

THE SAINT CHALLENGES DEATH ITSELF AS HE CONTINUES HIS SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH ABOUT ALESSANDRO DESTAMIO

for once in the history of advertising, the auto rental service may truly have been so excellent that all its cars had been taken. At any rate, perhaps with some help from the sheer number of seasonal tourists, the entire fleet of vehicles seemed to be gone. The only one left in sight was an antique and battered Fiat 500 that had been largely dismembered by the single mechanic who crawled from its oily entrails and wiped his hands on a piece of cotton waste as Simon approached.

"You have cars to rent?" said the Saint.

"*Sissignore.*" The man's sapient eye took in his patently un-Italian appearance. "I guess mebbe you like-a rent-a one?"

"I guess I would," said the Saint, patiently resigning himself to haggling down a price that would be automatically doubled now that the entrepreneur had identified him as a visiting foreigner.

"We got-a plenty cars, but all-a rent-a now, gahdam, except-a dis sonovabitch."

It was evident that the mechanic's English had been acquired from that ubiquitous font of linguistic elegance, the enlisted ranks of the American armed services.

"You mean that's your very last machine?" Simon asked, nodding at the disembowelled Fiat.

"*Sissignore.* Cute-a little turista, she built like a brick-a *gabinetto.* I 'ave 'er all-a ready dis evening."

"I wouldn't want her, even if you do get her put together again. Not that I want to hurt her feelings, but she just wasn't built to fit me. So could you perhaps tell me where I might

---

For a few rare moments Simon Templar had been looking forward solely to the *Arragosta alla Vesuvio* being readied in the depths of the Naples restaurant where he waited, and then the loud and angry voice of "Gopher" Destamio disturbs his peaceful mood, something Destamio had been known to do to many before it had proved necessary for him to return to the country of his fathers.

As Simon, ever ready to cope with the ungodly, begins to probe into the strange background of this man who he is convinced had arranged for the murder of an English tourist who seemed to know something about his past, he visits the great man at his villa on Capri ("Whose side you on?"), narrowly escapes assassination in Palermo and runs into an unfriendly *maresciallo dei carabinieri,* and meets a police detective who is waging a one-man war against the Mafia and who promptly enlists Simon's assistance.

And he meets Gina Destamio for the first time — a memorable meeting indeed — and decides then and there that he must visit the ancestral home of his good friend Alessandro Destamio, onetime pride of what in those pre-Valachi days people knew as the Syndicate.

But now read on.

find something my size?"

"Mebbe you like-a da rich car, Alfa-Romeo or mebbe Ferrari?"

There was a trace of a sneer in the question which Simon chose to ignore in the hope of saving time in his search.

"I have driven them. Also Bentleys, Lagondas, Jaguars, and in the good old days a Hirondel."

"You drive-a da Hirondel, eh? How she go, gahdam?"

"Like a sonovabitch," said the Saint gravely. "But that has nothing to do with the present problem. I still need a car."

"You like-a see sumping gahdam especial, make-a you forget Hirondel?"

"That I would like to see."

"Com-a wid me."

The man led the way to a door at the rear of the garage, and out into the dusty yard behind. Apart from the piles of rusty parts and old threadbare tires, there was a large amorphous object shrouded in a tarpaulin. With an air of reverence more usually reserved for the lifting of a bride's veil preparatory to the nuptial kiss, he untied the binding cords and gently drew back the canvas. Sunlight struck upon blood-red coachwork and chromed fittings; and the Saint permitted himself the uncommon luxury of a surprised whistle.

"Is that what I think it is?" he said.

"It gahdam-a sure is," the mechanic replied, with his eyes half closed in ecstatic contemplation. "You're-a look at a Bugatti!"

"And if I'm not mistaken, a type 41 Royale."

"Say, *professore*, you know all about-a dese bastards," said the man, giving Simon the title of respect due to his erudition.

There was once a body of *aficionados* who looked upon motoring as a sport, and not an air-conditioned power-assisted mechanical aid to bringing home the groceries, and among their ever-dwindling survivors there are still some purists who maintain that only in the golden years between 1919 and 1930 were any real automobiles constructed, and who dismiss all cars before or after that era as contemptible rubbish. The Saint was not quite such a fanatic, but he had an artist's respect for the masterpieces of that great decade.

He was now looking at one of the best of them. The name of Ettore Bugatti has the same magic to the motoring enthusiast as do those of Annie Besant or Karl Marx to other circles of believers. Bugatti was an eccentric genius who designed cars to suit himself and paid no attention to what other designers were

doing. In 1911, when all racing cars were lumbering behemoths, a gigantic Fiat snorted to victory in the Grand Prix. This was expected; but what was totally unexpected was the second-placing of Bugatti's first racer, looking like a mouse beside an elephant, with an engine only one-eighth the size of the monstrous winner. Bugatti continued to pull mechanical miracles like then. Then, in 1927, when everyone else was building small cars, he brought out the juggernaut on which Simon was now feasting his eyes.

"Dey build only seven," the owner crooned, carefully flicking a speck of dust from the glistening fender. "Bugatti 'imself bust-a one up in a wreck, and now dey only six sonovabitch in 'ole gahdam-a world."

Immense is an ineffective word for such a car. Over a wheel-base of more than fourteen feet, the rounded box of the coupe-de-ville shrank in perspective when seen along the unobstructed length of the brobdingnagian hood. The front fenders rose high, then swept far back to form a running-board.

"And-a look-a dis—"

The mechanic was manipulating the intricate locks and handles that secured the hood, and with no small effort he threw it open. He pointed with uncontainable pride to the spotless engine, which resembled the power plant of a locomotive rather than that of an automobile. It must have been more than five feet long.

"I have heard," Simon said, "that if a Bugatti starts at all, it will start with just one pull on the crank."

"Dat's-a right. *Sono raffinate* —what you call, 'igh-strung like-a race 'orse — but when she fix-a right, she always start. I show you!"

The man turned on the ignition, adjusted the hand throttle and the spark, and slipped the gleaming brass crank-handle into its socket. Then he waved the Saint to it with an operatic gesture.

"You try it yourself, *professore*!"

Simon stepped up, grasped the handle and engaged it carefully, and with a single coordinated effort gave it a crisp turn through a half-circle. Without a cough or a choke, the engine burst into responsive life, with a roar which did not entirely drown out a strangely pleasing metallic trill not unlike a battery of sewing machines in full stitch.

"That," said the Saint, raising his voice slightly, "would give me a lot of fun for a few days."

"No, no," protested the owner. "Dat sonovabitch not-a for rent. Much-a too valuable, should-a be in museum. I only show

you . . ."

His voice ran down as he stared at the currency which the Saint was peeling off the roll in his hand. The sum at which Simon stopped was perhaps wantonly extravagant, but to the Saint it did not seem too high to pay for the fun of having such a historic toy to play with. And after all, he reflected, it was only Al Destamio's money.

Thus, in due course, having gone back to collect his jacket while the rental paper-work was being prepared, after signing the necessary forms and being checked out on the controls, the Saint seated himself at the wheel, engaged first gear, and let up gently on the clutch. With a tremor of joy the mighty monster gathered itself and sprang through the open gates into the alley behind while its owner waved a dramatic and emotional farewell.

For a motorist of refined perceptions, driving a Bugatti is an experience like hearing the definitive performance of a classical symphony. Dynamic efficiency and supreme road-holding were the qualities that Bugatti wanted before anything else; and since he was a man incapable of compromise, that was what he obtained. The steering wheel vibrated delicately in the Saint's fingers, like a live member, sensitive to his lightest touch; guidance was like cutting butter with a hot knife. There was a little more difficulty with slowing up, since Bugatti always intended his cars to go rather than stop, but this could be overcome by adroit down-shifting and extra assistance from the hand brake. Simon happily sounded the horn, which gave out a rich tuneful note like a trombone, as he passed groups of cheering urchins and gaping adults on his way out of the town. The engine boomed with delight, and the great length of the red hood surged forth into the countryside.

Only too quickly the details of Ponti's sketch map spun by, until at a last turning he saw the Destamio manse before him. With some reluctance he turned off the pavement and parked under the shade of a tree.

A high wall, topped with an unfriendly crest of broken bottles and shards of tile, surrounded the grounds and hid all of the house except the roof. He pressed a button beside a pair of massive iron-bound wooden doors, and waited patiently until at long last a medieval lock grated open and a smaller door set in one of the vast ones creaked open. A short swarthy woman in a maid's apron peered out suspiciously.

"Buona sera," he said pleasantly. "My name is Templar, to

see Donna Maria."

He stepped forward confidently, and the maid let him pass through. His first strategy was to give the impression that he was expected, and to go as far as he could on that momentum, but this was not enough to get him into the house. On the balustraded terrace which ran across the full width of the building, the maid waved him towards a group of porch furniture.

"Wait here, if you please, *signore*. I will tell Donna Maria. What was the name?"

Simon repeated it, and remained standing while he surveyed the house, a typically forbidding and cumbersome box-like structure of chipped and fading pink plaster with shutters that badly needed repainting, a shabby contrast with the well-kept and ordered brilliance of the garden. He had transferred his attention to that more agreeable scene when he heard a measured and heavy tread behind him, and turned again.

"Donna Maria?" he said, with his most engaging smile, preferring his hand. "My name is Simon Templar. I am an old friend of your brother Alessandro. When he heard that I was coming to Palermo, he insisted that I should come and see you."

The woman stood unmoving, except to glance down at his hand as if it were a long-dead fish. This expression perfectly fitted the lines around her mouth and flared nostrils, and was obviously one that she used a great deal. Her straggly mustache was black; but the mass of her hair, pulled back into a tight bun, was a dull steel gray. She was a head shorter than the Saint, but at least twice his diameter, and this bulk was encased in a corset of such strength and inelasticity that there was little human about the resultant shape. In the traditionally characterless black dress outside it, she reminded him of a piano-legged barrel draped for mourning.

"I never see my brother's friends," she said. "He keeps his business separate from his family life."

Just as no ornament relieved the drabness of her robe, no trace of cordiality tempered the chill of her words. Only a person with the Saint's self- assurance and ulterior motives could have survived that reception; but his smile was brazenly unshaken.

"That shows you how he values our friendship. We were in the same business in America, where I come from — almost partners. So when I was at his villa in Capri the other day, for lunch, he made me promise to call on you."

"Why?"

The question was a challenge and almost a rebuttal in advance. It was clear that Al Destamio did not send his friends to the ancestral demesne out of spontaneous good-fellowship—if he ever sent them at all. Simon realized that he would have to improve his excuse, and quickly, or in a few seconds he would be outside again with nothing achieved but a glimpse of the unprepossessing facades of Donna Maria and her lair.

"Alessandro insisted that I should get to know you," he said, allowing a rather sinister frigidity to creep into his own voice. "He told me what a good sister you were, and how he wanted to be sure that in any time of trouble you would know which of his friends to turn to."

The ambiguity reached a mark of some kind: at least, there was an instant's uncertainty in the woman's basilisk gaze, and afterwards a very fractional unbending in her adamantine reserve.

"It has been a hot day, and you will enjoy a cold drink before you leave."

"You are much too hospitable," said the Saint, achieving the miracle of keeping all sarcasm out of his reading.

She made a sign to the maid, who had been pointedly waiting within range, and lowered herself stiffly into one of the chairs.

Simon turned to choose a seat for himself, and in so doing was confronted by a vision which almost equalled his wildest expectations.

Approaching through an archway of rambler roses, from a hedged area of the garden where she had apparently been taking a sunbath, was Gina Destamio, clad only in a bikini of such minuscule proportions that its two elements concealed little more of her than did her sunglasses. Her skin was a light golden-brown in the last rays of sunlight, and the ultimate details of her figure more than fulfilled every exquisite promise they had made under the dress in which he had last seen her. It was a sight to make even a hardened old pirate like Simon Templar toy with the idea of writing just one more sonnet.

Not so Donna Maria, who sucked in her breath like an asthmatic vacuum cleaner, then let it whoosh out in a single explosive sentence, crackling with lightning and rumbling with volcanic tension. It was in dialect, of which Simon understood hardly a word, but its themes were abundantly clear from the intonation: shamelessness, disgracing a respectable family before a total stranger, and the basic depravity of the new generation. The thunderbolts siz-

zled around Gina's tousled head, and she only smiled. Whatever other effect the Swiss finishing school might have had, it had certainly finished her awe of matriarchal dragons.

She turned the same smile on the Saint, and he basked in it.

"You must excuse me," she said. "I did not know we had a visitor."

"You must excuse me for being here," he replied. "But I refuse to say I am sorry."

She slipped leisurely into the cotton jacket which she had carried over her arm, while Donna Maria painfully forced herself to perform a belated introduction.

"My niece, Gina. This is Signor Templar from America."

"Haven't I seen you before?" Gina asked innocently, in perfect English.

"I didn't think you'd recognize me," he answered in the same language. "You looked right through me to the wall behind, as if I were a rather dirty window that somebody had forgotten to wash."

"I'm sorry. But our rules here are very oldfashioned. It's scandalous enough that I sometimes go into town alone. If I let myself smile back at anyone who hadn't been properly introduced, I should be ruined for life. And even a nice Sicilian would get the wrong ideas. But now I'm glad that we have another chance."

"*Non capisco!*" Donna Maria hissed.

"My aunt doesn't speak English," Gina said, and reverted to Italian. "Are you here for business or pleasure?"

"I was beginning to think it was all business, but since your uncle sent me here it has suddenly become a pleasure."

"Not Uncle Alessandro? I am glad you know him. He has been so good to us here —"

"Gina," interrupted the chatelaine, her voice as gentle as a buzz-saw cutting metal, "I am sure the gentleman is not interested in our family affairs. He is only having a little drink before he leaves."

The maid returned from the house, opportunely, with a tray on which were bottles of vermouth, a bowl of ice, a siphon, and glasses.

"How nice," Gina said. "I am ready for one myself. Let me pour them."

Her aunt shot her a venomous glance which openly expressed a bitter regret that her niece was no longer at an age when she could be bent over a knee and disciplined properly. But the girl seemed quite oblivious to it, and the Dragon Queen could only glower at her back as she proceeded to pour and mix with quite sophisticated efficiency.

"Have you seen much of Palermo yet?" Gina asked, as if seeking a neutral topic out of respect for her guardian's blood-pressure.

"Nothing much," Simon said. "What do you think I should see?"

"Everything! The Cathedral, the Palatine Chapel, Zisa, Casa Professa—and you should drive out to Monreale, it is only a few kilometers, and see the Norman cathedral and cloisters."

"I must do that," said the Saint, with surprising enthusiasm for one who, in spite of his sobriquet, seldom included cathedrals and cloisters among his sightseeing objectives. "Perhaps you could come with me and tell me all about them."

"I would like to—"

"My niece cannot accompany you," Donna Maria rasped. "There are professional guides to do that."

Gina opened her mouth as if to protest, then seemed to think better of it. Apparently she knew from experience that such battles could not be won by direct opposition. But she gazed thoughtfully at the Saint, biting her lip, as though inviting him to think of some way to get around or over the interdiction.

Simon raised his glass to the chaperone wtih a courteous "*Salute!*" and sipped it, wishing there had been more choice of beverage. His palate would never learn to accept the two vermouths as drinks in their own right, instead of as mere ghostly flavorings added to gin or bourbon respectively.

"I did not want to cause any trouble," he said. "But it was Alessandro's suggestion that Gina might like to show me around."

Donna Maria glared at him sullenly — he could not decide whether she was more resentful at having to control an impulse to call him a liar, or at a disconcerting possibility that he might be telling the truth.

"I must look in my diary and see if there is any day when I can spare her," she said finally. "If you will excuse me."

She lurched to her feet and waddled into the house without waiting for confirmation.

"I'm afraid she doesn't like me," Simon remarked.

"It isn't you in particular," Gina said apologetically. "She hates practically everybody, and twice as much if they're men. I sometimes think that's what keeps her alive. She's so pickled in her own venom that she's probably indestructible and will still be here in another fifty years."

"It's funny there should be such a difference between her and her brother. Al is such a big-hearted guy."

"That's true! Do you know, he takes care of the whole family and pays all the bills. He sent me to school and everything. If it hadn't been for him I don't know what would have happened to us all. When my parents were killed in a car accident they didn't have any insurance, and there was hardly any money in the bank. I was only seven at the time, but I remember people looking at the house and talk about selling it. Even Unce Al was very sick just then and everyone thought he was going to die. But he got better and went to America, and soon he began sending back money. He's been looking after us ever since. And yet he hardly ever comes near us. Aunt Maria says it may be because he feels we'd be embarrassed by remembering how much we owe him."

The Saint lounged in his chair with long legs outstretched, sipping his drink perfunctorily and listening with the appearance of only casual interest; but under that camouflage his mind was ticking over like a computer, registering every word, correlating it with previous information, and reaching on towards what hypotheses might be derived from their multiple combination. He had an extrasensory feeling that the answer to the Cartelli-Destamio riddle was close at hand, if he could only grasp it, or if one more link would bring it within reach. . .

And then the fragments that were starting to fit together were rudely pushed apart again by the voice that spoke behind him.

"*Signore,* it is getting late for you to return to the city." Donna Maria was returning from her errand. "It would not be well-bred to send a friend of Alessandro's away at such an hour. You will stay for dinner?"

Even more devastating than the astonishing reversal of her attitude was the expression that accompanied it. A ripple of life passed across her inflexible cheeks, and her bloodless lips curled back to expose a fearsome row of yellow fangs. For a moment Simon wondered if she was preparing to leap on him and rend him like a werewolf, or whether she was merely suffering the rictus of some kind of epileptic seizure. It was a second or two before it dawned on him what was really happening.

Donna Maria was trying to smile.

"Thank you. You are very kind," said the Saint, making a heroic effort to overcome the shock of that horrendous sight.

Gina was more openly dumbfounded by the switch, and took a moment longer to recover.

"Well — I must get changed. Excuse me."

She ran into the house.

"And I must give some orders to the servants." Donna Maria's face was positively haggard with the strain of being gracious. "Please make yourself comfortable for a few minutes. And help yourself to another drink."

She withdrew again, leaving the Saint alone to digest the startling reversal of his reception.

And in another moment the maid reappeared, bearing a bottle of Lloyd's gin which she added to the selection on the tray.

"Donna Maria thought you might prefer this," she said, and retired again.

Simon lighted a cigarette and examined the bottle. It was new and unopened, to every appearance, and there had certainly not been time since Donna Maria's change of attitude for it to have been doped or poisoned and cunningly re-sealed; so unless bottles of pre-hoked liquor were a standard item in stock at the Destamio hacienda there could be no risk in accepting it. In moderation . . : The Saint gratefully emptied the glass he had been nursing into a flower-pot and proceeded to concoct himself a very dry martini, feeling much like a prodigal son for whom the best barrel had been rolled out.

But deep inside him he felt an intangible hollowness which came from the tightening of nerves which were not nervous but only sharpening their sensitivity and readiness to whatever call might be suddenly made on them.

He could not cherish the beautiful illusion that after a lifetime of notorious malevolence Donna Maria had chosen that evening to be struck as by lightning with remorse for her churlishness, and after a brief absence to commune with her soul had returned radiant and reformed to make amends for all her past unpleasantnesses. Or that his own handsome face and charming manners had broken through an obsidian crust to the soft heart that it encased. Some very practical reason had to be responsible for the alteration, and he could not make himself generous enough to believe that it was without ulterior motive.

The question remained: what motive?

The sun had descended behind the western hills, and purple shadows reached into the courtyard, deepening the dusty gray-green of the olive trees, as the first cool breeze drifted in from the sea. With the dusk, the house was not softened, but seemed to become even more stark and sinister. Somewhere in its depths a clock chimed with deep reverberant notes that made one think of the tolling of

funeral bells.

As the hour struck, a door opened under the balcony at the far end of the terrace, and a wheel-chair appeared with the promptitude of a cuckoo called forth by some horlogic mechanism. Simon watched in fascination as the maid wheeled it to the table opposite him and vanished again without a word. The occupant of the chair matched the building in senescence; in fact, he looked old enough to have built it himself.

"A lovely evening," Simon ventured at last, when it became clear that any conversational initiative would have to come from him.

"Ah," said the ancient.

It extended a withered and tremulous claw, not to shake hands, but towards the glasses on the table.

"What can I get you?" Simon asked.

"Ah."

Simon made what he felt was an inspired compromise by pouring a half-and-half mixture of sweet and dry vermouths and proferring it.

"Ah", said the venerable mummy, and after taking a small sip, carefully spilled the rest on the ground.

"What did you think of Dante's latest book?" Simon tried again.

"Ah," said the patriarch wisely, and sat back to enjoy a slow chomping of toothless gums while he examined the Saint from the blinking moist caverns of his eyes.

The possibilities of small talk seemed to have been exhausted, and Simon was wondering whether to try making faces at his *vis-a-vis* and see whether that would evoke any livelier response, when he was saved from that decision by the return of Gina, now wearing something thin and simple that clung provocatively to the curves that he could reconstruct in clinical detail from memory.

"Has Uncle been bothering you?" she asked.

"Not at all," said the Saint. "I just haven't been able to find anything to talk about that he's interested in. Or maybe my accent baffles him."

"*Povero Zio,*" Gina said, smiling and patting the ancient's hand. "I can't even remember a time when he wasn't old, but he was nice to me when I was a little girl. He used to tell me wonderful stories about how he marched with Garibaldi in his last campaign, and I'd forget to be worried about when we were going to be kicked out of our house."

"Ah . . . ah," said the old man, straightening up a little as if the words had sparked some long-forgotten memory; but it was

a transient stimulus and he slumped back down again without producing his scintillating comment.

"Uncle — you can't mean that he's Alessandro's brother?" Simon said.

"Oh, no. He's really Uncle Alessandro's uncle — and Donna Maria's."

As if answering to her name, the lady of the manse made another entrance. If she had changed her black dress for an evening model, it would have taken the eye of a *couturier's* spy to tell the difference, but she had hung a gold chain around her neck and stuck a comb set with brilliants in her hair as evidence that she was formally dressed for dinner.

"You need not trouble yourself about *Lo Zio,* Signor Templar," she said, with another labored display of her death's-head smirk. "He hears very little and understands even less, but it makes him happy to be in our company. If you have finished your drink, we can go in to dinner."

She led the way into the house, into a large dimly lighted hallway with an ornate wooden staircase that led up into a lofty void of darkness from which Simon would not have been surprised to see bats fly out. Gina pushed Lo Zio's wheelchair, and the Saint ingratiatingly gave her a hand. The dining room was almost as spooky as the hall, illuminated only by candles which hardly revealed the dingy ancestral paintings which looked down from the walls.

"I hope you won't mind the dinner," Gina said. "We never have guests, and all the cook knows is plain country food. I'm sure it isn't the sort of thing you're used to."

"I'm sure it'lll be a pleasant change," said the Saint politely.

His optimism was not misplaced. Home cooking is a much crumpled appellation in some parts of the world, too often synonymous with confections from the freezer and the can, but in Italy it still retains some of its original meaning, and occasionally in restaurants labeled "*casalinga*" one can find family-style cooking of a high order. But the literal authentic article, of course, is served only in private homes to relatives and close friends, and rarely is the foreigner allowed to penetrate this inner circle.

Nothing is purchased prefabricated by the traditional Italian housewife. If tomato sauce is needed, the tomatoes are pressed and the seeds removed by hand. The delicate doughs that enfold *canelloni* and *cappelletti* are handrolled from a mixture of flour and egg with never a drop

of water added. Fresh herbs and spices, grown in the kitchen garden, are added with the loving care that lifts a sauce from the pedestrian to the ambrosial. It goes without saying that in the south one must expect a liberal hand in the application of garlic and olive oil; but that was no disadvantage to the Saint, who was gifted with the digestion to cope happily with such robust ingredients.

Since the evening meal is customarily a light one, it began with *olive schiacciate,* a succulent salad of olives, celery, and peppers. After this came the *Involtini alla siciliana,* a toothsome filling in envelopes of gossamerlight paste smothered in a sauce so savory that good manners could only encourage the pursuit of every last drop with mops of the crusty brown homebaked bread. A large circulating carafe of young homemade red wine provided ample and impeccable liquid accompaniment; and after observing that everyone's glass was filled from it, just as the same platters were presented to all of them to help themselves, except Lo Zio whose plate was tended by Gina sitting next to him, Simon was able to suppress all disturbing memories of the Borgias and give himself up to unstinting enjoyment of his gastronomic good fortune.

They made a strange quartet around the massive age-blackened table, and the medieval gloom around them and the echoing footsteps of the maid on the bare floor did little to encourage relaxation and conviviality, but by concentrating on Gina and the food he was able to maintain some harmless and totally unmemorable conversation, while wondering all the time why he had been invited to stay and when the reason would be revealed in some probably most unpleasant and distressing way.

"A most wonderful meal," he complimented Donna Maria at the end of it. "I feel guilty for imposing on you, but I shall always be glad that I did."

"You must not rush away. We will have coffee in the drawing room, and I will see if there is some brandy, if you would like that."

She flashed her alligator smile as she rose; and Simon, steeled now not to recoil, smiled back.

"Perhaps I should refuse," he said. "But that might suggest that you did not mean it, and I am sure you do."

As he helped Gina to push the wheel-chair again, which somehow seemed to give them a sort of secret companionship, she said: "I don't know how you've done it, but nobody ever broke her down like this before.

Brandy, now!"

"Brandy, ah!" repeated Lo Zio, his head lifting like a buzzard's and swivelling around.

"You should have given me a chance in that restaurant," said the Saint. "If I could have persuaded you to stay for lunch, we might have had all the afternoon together."

The drawing room had three electric lights of thrifty wattage which made it very little brighter than the dining room. The furniture was stiff and formal, a baroque mixture of uncertain periods, upholstered with brocades as faded as the heavy drapes. Donna Maria came in with a dusty bottle, followed by the maid with a tray of coffee.

"Would you be so kind as to open it, Signor Templar? I am sure you know how to handle such an old bottle better than we women."

Simon manipulated the corkscrew with expert gentleness, but not without the thought that he might have been given the job as yet another move to reassure him. Certainly it enabled him to verify that this bottle, with all its incrustations of age, would have been even harder to tamper with than the gin which he had drunk before dinner. He deciphered with approval the name of Jules Robin under the grime on the scarred label, and poured generous doses into the snifters which were produced from some dark recess — not omitting one for Lo Zio, who showed some of his vague signs of human animation as he fastened his rheumy eyes on the bottle.

"*Salute!*" Simon said, and watched them all drink before he allowed his own first swallow to actually pass his lips.

It was a magnificent cognac, which had probably been lying in the cellar since the death of Gina's father, and nothing seemed to have been done to turn it into a lethal or even stupefying nightcap.

Was all this hospitality, then, nothing but a stall to create time, during which Al Destamio might round up a few commandos and get them out to the mansion to capture the Saint or quietly mow him down?

Whatever the reason, he felt sure that Gina was not in on it. He looked again at her lovely radiant face, alight with the spontaneous pleasure of the kind of company which she could almost never have been permitted, and decided that he could lose nothing by testing just how far this astounding acceptance could be stretched.

"I am looking forward to seeing the local sights tomorrow, even though I have to do it with a commercial guide," he said, and turned to Donna Maria. "Or

now that you know me a little better, would you reconsider and let Gina accompany me?"

An observer who was unacquainted with the preceding circumstances would have assumed, at a glance, that Donna Maria was trying inconspicuously to swallow a live cockroach which she had carelessly sucked in with her brandy.

"Perhaps I was being too hasty," she said. "Since you are such a close friend of Alessandro, there is really no reason for me to object. What are you most interested in?"

The resultant discussion of Sicilian antiquities continued this time with no contribution from Gina, whose eyes had become slightly glassy and her jaw slack, either from renewed bewilderment or from trepidation lest anything she interjected would change her aunt's mind again.

Another refill of cognac was pressed on the not too resistant Saint, though curtly refused to Lo Zio, who having smacked his way through his first was plaintively extending his glass for more. But after that there was nothing left to stay for, short of asking if they had a spare room for the night.

"Tomorrow at ten, then, Gina," he said, and stood up. "And I'll tell Alessandro how nice all of you have been."

The last remark was principally intended for the reigning tyrant of the establishment, but it scored first on Lo Zio, who must have been feeling some effects from his unaccustomed libations.

"Ah, Alessandro," he said, as if some cobwebby relay had been tripped. "I told him. I warned him. Told him he should not go to Rome—"

"It is late, Lo Zio, and well past your bed time," Donna Maria said hastily.

She whipped the wheel-chair around with a suddenness that had the old man's head bobbing like a balloon on a string. The maid came scurrying in on a barked command, and whisked away the chair and its mumbling contents.

"*Buona notte, signore,*" Donna Maria said, with one more spasm of her overworked facial muscles, and the impression of it seemed to remain even after she had closed the front door, like the grin of some Sicilian Cheshire cat.

Simon made the short walk to the driveway gate with his nerves as taut as violin strings, his ears straining, and his eyes darting into every shadow. But there was no warning scuff or stir to herald an onslaught by lurking assailants, no crack of a shot to make belated announcement of a bullet. He

opened the inset door, flung it open, and leapt far through it in an eruptively connected series of cat-swift movements calculated to disconcert any ambush that might be waiting outside; but no attack came. An almost-full moon that was rising above the hills showed a road deserted except for his own car where he had left it, and the only sound was the thin shrill rasping of multitudinous nocturnal insects. Feeling a trifle foolish, he turned back and shut the little door, and then walked towards the Bugatti, making a wide swing out into the road around it, just in case someone was skulking on the side from which he would not have been expected to approach. But no one was.

Then he had not been detained in order to gain time to organize a bushwhacking, it seemed . . .

But the instinct of an outlaw who had carried his life in his hands so often that his reflexes had adapted to it as a natural condition was not lulled into somnolence merely because logic seemed to have suspended the immediate need for it. If anything, it was left more on edge than ever, seeking the flaw in conclusions which did not jibe with intuition.

He climbed halfway into the driver's seat and peered in search of the ignition lock. He located it and inserted the key; but as he raised his head again above the dashboard before switching on, his eye was caught by a blemish on the gleaming expanse of hood which did not belong at all on such a lovingly burnished surface.

Clearly revealed by the moonlight was the print of a greasy hand.

Simon very carefully withdrew the key, stepped down to the road again, and went around to examine the hood more closely. But the print seemed to have disappeared. Bending over until his face almost touched the metal, he sighted towards the radiator and found the mark again, a dull slur in the reflected moonlight.

A ghostly breath stirred the hairs on the nape of his neck as he realized how narrowly he might have missed that discovery. If he had come out a few minutes earlier or later, the moon would not have been striking the hood at the precise angle required to show it up. Or if he had not already been keyed to the finest pitch of vigilance, he might still have thought nothing of it. But now he could only remember how affectionately the garage owner had wiped the hood again after showing him the engine, and he knew with certainty that there

could have been no such mark on it when he set out. He had not stopped anywhere on the way, to give anyone a chance to approach the machine before he parked it there. Therefore the mark had been made since he arrived, while he was enjoying Donna Maria's hospitality.

With the utmost delicacy he manipulated the fastenings of the hood and opened it up. The pencil flashlight that he was seldom without revealed that the mammoth engine was still there, but with a new feature added that would have puzzled Signor Bugatti.

A large wad of something that looked like putty had been draped over the rear of the engine block and pressed into shape around it. Into this substance had been pushed a thin metal cylinder, something like a mechanical pencil, from which two slender wires looped over and lost themselves in the general tangle of electrical connections.

With surgically steady fingers the Saint extracted the metal tube, then gently and separately pulled the wires free from their invisible attachments. Deprived of its detonator, the plastic bomb again became as harmless as the putty it so closely resembled.

"This one almost worked, Al," he whispered softly. "And if it had, I'd have had only myself to blame. I underestimated you. But that won't happen again. . ."

There were some excellent fingerprints in the plastic material where the demolition expert had squeezed it into place, doubtless in all confidence that there would be nothing left of them to incriminate him. Taking care not to damage them, Simon peeled the blob off the engine and put it in the trunk, wedging it securely where it could not roll around when he drove.

He cranked up the engine and drove slowly and pensively back to Palermo, the impatient motor growling a basso accompaniment to his thoughts.

It was easy enough now to understand everything that had been puzzling before. Donna Maria's first absence from the terrace had given her time to telephone Al Destamio on Capri and ask for confirmation of the alleged friendship. Al's reaction could be readily imagined. He would already have learned of the failure of the first assassination attempt; and the revelation that the Saint had had the effrontery to head straight for the Destamio mansion and blarney his way in, instead of thankfully taking the next plane for some antipodean sanctuary, must have done wondrous things to his adrenalin production. The dinner invitation must have followed on his orders, to keep the Saint there long enough for an-

other hatchet man to be sent there to arrange a more final and effective termination of the nuisance.

And this deduction made Donna Maria's bit part somewhat more awesome. Throughout the dinner and crocodile congeniality, she had been setting him up like a clay pipe in a shooting gallery. That was why she could afford to give in so readily on the question of granting permission for Gina to go out with him the next day: she had been complacently certain that the Saint would not be around to hold her to the promise. Only one interesting speculation remained — had she known just how violently it had been intended to insure his nonappearance?

Simon tooled the big car in through the garage entrance of the hotel and slipped it into an empty stall. As the thunder of the engine died away, he was aware of an even heightened resentment.

It was bad enough to be continually sniped at himself, the perplexed target of an incomprehensible vendetta. But now these monsters had exposed the utter depths of their depravity by their willingness to destroy that historic treasure of a car, merely in the process of putting a bomb under him.

It followed imperatively that no extra effort could be spared to insure that Al Destamio spent the most troubled night that could be organized for him. Even if the effort involved the prodigious hazards of trying to inaugurate a long-distance telephone communication against the obstacles of the hour and the antiquated apparatus available.

The phone in Simon's room was apparently dead, and only a great deal of bopping on the button and some hearty thumps on the bell box succeeded in restoring it to a simulacrum of life. The resultant thin buzzing was presently interrupted by the yawning voice of the desk clerk, obviously resentful at being disturbed.

"I would like to call Capri," said the Saint.

"It is not easy at night, *signore*. If you would wait until morning —"

"It would be too late. I want the call now."

"*Sissignore*," sibilated the clerk, in a tone of injured dignity.

There followed a series of rasping sounds, not unlike a coarse file caressing the edge of a pane of glass, followed by a voiceless silence. Far in the distance could be heard the dim rush of an electronic waterfall, and Simon shouted into it until another voice spiralled up from

the depths. It was the night operator in Palermo, who was no more enthused about trying to establish a telephonic connection at that uncivilized hour than the hotel clerk had been. Too late Simon realized the magnitude of the task he had undertaken, but he was not going to back out now.

With grim politeness he acceded to obstructive demands for an infinitude of irrelevant information, of which the name and location of residence of the person he was calling and his own home address and passport number were merely a beginning, until the operator tired first and consented to essay the impossible.

The line remained open while the call progressed somewhat less precipitately than Hannibal's elephants had crossed the Alps.

A first hazard seemed to be the water surrounding the island of Sicily. It could only have been in his imagination, but Simon had a vivid sensation of listening to hissing foam and crashing waves as the connection forced its way through a waterlogged cable, struggling with blind persistence to reach the mainland. The impression was affirmed when a mainland operator was finally reached and the noises died away to a frustrated background susurration.

For a few minutes the Palermo operator and this new link in the chain exchanged formalities and incidental gossip, and at least reluctantly came to the subject of Simon's call. A mutual agreement was reached that, though the gamble was sure to fail, the sporting thing would be at least to try whether the call could be pushed any further. Both operators laughed hollowly at the thought, but switches must have been thrown, because a hideous grumbling roar like a landslide swallowing an acre of greenhouses rose up and drowned their voices.

Simon lighted his remaining cigarette, crumpled the empty pack, and made himself as comfortable as possible. The phone was beginning to numb his ear, and he changed to the other side.

There was more of the ominous crunching, periodically varying in timbre and volume, and after a long while the second operator's voice struggled back to the surface.

"I am sorry, I have not been able to reach Naples. Would you like to cancel the call?"

"I woud not like to cancel the call," Simon said relentlessly. "I can think of no reason why you should not reach Naples. It was there this morning, and it must be there now, unless there has

been another eruption of Mount Vesuvius."

"I do not know about that. But all the lines to Naples are engaged."

"Try again," said the Saint encouragingly. "While we are talking someone may have hung up or dropped dead. Persevere."

The operator mumbled something indistinguishable, which Simon felt he was probably better off for not hearing, and the background of crashings and inhuman groanings returned again. But after another interminable wait, persistence was rewarded by a new voice saying "*Napoli.*"

Reaching Capri from Naples was no worse than anything that had gone before, and it was with a justifiable thrill of achievement that Simon at last heard the ringing of Destamio's phone through the overtones of din. Eventually someone answered it, and Simon shouted his quarry's name at the top of his voice.

"*Il Signore is busy,*" came the answer. "He cannot be disturbed. You must call again in the morning."

After all he had been through, the Saint was not going to be stopped there.

"I do not care how busy he is," he said coldly. "You will tell him that this call is from Sicily, and I have news that he will want to hear."

There was an explosive crackle as if the entire instrument at the other end had been shattered on a marble slab, and for a while Simon thought the servant had summarily disposed of the problem by hanging up; but he held on, and presently another voice spoke, with grating tones that even the telephone's distortions could not completely disguise.

"*Parla, ascolto!*"

The Saint stubbed out the remains of his cigarette and finally relaxed.

"Alessandro, my dear old chum, I knew you'd be glad to hear from me, even at this hour."

"Who's-a dat?"

"This is Simon Templar, Al, you fat gob of overcooked macaroni. Just calling to tell you that your comic-opera assassins have flunked again — and that I don't want them trying any more. I want you to call them off, chum."

"I dunno what ya talkin' about, Saint." There was a growing note of distress in the harsh voice as it assimilated the identity of the caller. "Maybe you drink too much wine tonight. Where you calling from?"

"From my hotel in Palermo, which I'm sure you can easily find. But don't send any more of your stooges here to annoy me. The firework they planted

in my car while Donna Maria was being so hospitable didn't go off. But I found out a lot of interesting things during my visit, to add on to what I knew before. And I wanted to tell you that I've just put all this information on paper and deposited it in a place from which it will be forwarded to a much less accomodating quarter than your tame *maresciallo* here, if anything happens to me. So tell your goons to lay off, Al."

"I don't understand! Are you nuts?" blustered Destamio, almost hysterically. "What you tryin' to do to me?"

"You'll find out," said the Saint helpfully. "And I hope your bank account can stand it. Meanwhile, pleasant dreams..."

He replaced the receiver delicately in its bracket, and then dropped the entire contraption into the wastebasket, where it whirred and buzzed furiously and finally expired.

As if on cue, there followed a light tapping on the door.

The Saint took his precautions about opening it. There was still the possibility that some of Destamio's henchmen might be working on general instructions to scrub him — it would certainly take time for countermanding orders to circulate, even if the Mafia had also penetrated the telephone service. Until the word had had time to get around, he was playing it safe.

Marco Ponti entered, and eyed with mild surprise the gun that was levelled at his abdomen. Then he calmly kicked the door shut behind him.

"That is a little inhospitable," he remarked. "And illegal too, unless you have an Italian license for that weapon."

"I was going to ask you how to get one, the next time I saw you," said the Saint innocently, and caused the weapon to vanish and be forgotten. "But I was not expecting you to call at such an hour as this, *amico*."

"I am not being social. I wanted to hear how your visit turned out. And I have learned something that may be of value to you."

"I would like one of your cigarettes while you give me your news. It may have some bearing on what I can tell you."

"I hardly expect that," Ponti said, throwing his pack of *Nazionali* on the table. "It is only that you gave me a name, and like a good policeman I have checked the records. Though you may sneer — and I sometimes sneer myself at the middenheaps of records we keep— occasionally we find a nugget in the slag. I searched for the name you gave me, the murdered bank clerk, Dino Cartelli. I found nothing about him except the facts of his death. But

I also found the record of another Cartelli, his elder brother, Ernesto, who was killed by the Fascisti."

Simon frowned.

"Now I'm out of my depth. Why should that be worth knowing?"

"In his early days, *Il Duce* had a campaign to wipe out the Mafia — perhaps on the theory there was only room for one gang of crooks in the country, and he wanted it to be his gang. So for a while he shot some of the small fry and hung others up in cages for people to laugh at. Later on, of course, the Mafia joined forces with him, they were birds of a feather—but that is another story. At any rate, in one of the early raids, Ernesto Cartelli shot it out with the Blackshirts, who proved to be better shots."

"Do you mean," Simon ventured slowly, "that since Ernesto was a *mafioso,* his brother Dino may have been one too?"

"It is almost certain—though of course it cannot be proved. But the Mafia is a closed society, very hard to enter, and when anyone is a member it usually means that his other close male relatives are members too."

The Saint's eyes narrowed in thought as he inhaled abstractedly and deeply from the strong Italian cigarette, an indiscretion which he instantly regretted.

"So the Mafia keeps coming back into the picture," he said. "Al Destamio is in it, now it seems that Dino Cartelli was probably in it, whether or not they are the same person; and they have me at the top of their list of people to be dispensed with. I knew you would be glad to hear that they tried again tonight to put me out of the way."

"Not at the Destamio house?"

"Just outside it. If they had succeeded, it might even have broken some windows."

Simon told the story of his macabre evening, and the fortunate discovery that had not quite ended it.

"And there are some wonderful fingerprints in the plastic, which is still intact," he concluded.

"That is splendid news," Ponti said delightedly. "These Mafia scum can usually get out of anything by producing armies of false witnesses, but it is another matter to witness away fingerprints. At least this will tell us who placed the bomb, and he may lead us to someone else."

"I was sure you would be happy about my narrow escape from death," said the Saint ironically.

"My dear friend, I am overjoyed. May you have many more such close scrapes, and each time bring back evidence like

that. You did bring it back, of course?"

Simon grinned, and tossed him the car keys.

"You will find it in the trunk. Leave the keys under the front seat, they will be safe enough there. I think Alessandro will take time to think out his next move."

"I hope he does not take too long," said the detective. "But whenever you want to get in touch with me again, I will give you a number to call." He scribbled on a page from his notebook, tore it out, and handed it to Simon. "This is not the *questura*, but a place which can be trusted with any messages you leave, and which can always find me very quickly." He turned and opened the door, with unconcealed impatience to get to the garage and the evidence there. "Goodnight, and good luck."

"The same to you," said the Saint.

He locked and bolted the door again, just on general principles, but he went to sleep as peacefully as a child. It had been a full and merry day, and the morrow was likely to be even livelier. Which only sustained his contented conviction that the world was a beautiful place to have fun in.

IV: How the Saint went to a Graveyard, and Don Pasquale made a Proposal.

Promptly at ten the next morning Simon announced his arrival outside the walls of the Destamio estate with a brazen call on the Bugatti's horn which rebounded satisfactorily from the neighboring hills, incidentally triggering the responsive barking of dogs and a rattle of wings as a startled flock of pigeons whirled overhead, before he confirmed the announcement of his arrival more conventionally with a tug on the bell-pull at the entrance.

He did not think there was much danger that Destamio would have prepared to sacrifice his own parental portals with another charge of explosive tied to the bell, but aside from that he had no idea what he expected. Would there be another more personalized elimination squad waiting to lay on the welcome to end all welcomes, or would Destamio have refused to believe that the Saint would have the nerve to come back and claim his date with Gina? Would Donna Maria at this moment be frantically telephoning to ask what she should do now, while Gina was being hastily incarcerated in whatever version of a medieval dungeon could be found in the establish-

ment? Or would the house simply remain inscrutably deaf and blind to him as to an unwelcome salesman until he gave up and went away? There had been only one way to find out, and that was to go there and ring the bell and see what happened.

What happened was that the gate opened and Gina came out into the sunlight with her graceful step that was like dancing, and Simon smiled with sudden joy as he held the car door for her.

Whatever might be coming next, at least the adventure was not going to wallow to a soggy halt.

"This is much more than I seriously expected," he said, once she had settled into the leather seat and the great car had made its thunderous take-off.

"Why?" she asked.

"I was afraid your aunt would have changed her mind about letting you go on this expedition, or talked you out of it."

"Why should she do that? There's nothing wrong with my seeing you, is there?"

She forced a small smile as she said it, but a slight halting note in her voice told him with piercing clarity not only that she was playing a part but also that she was not relishing it. The falseness was as transpicuous as her sincerity had been the day before. But for the moment he was not ready to let her know that her effort was already wasted.

"How could there be," he replied blandly, "if neither of us has any wickedness in mind?"

He deliberately refrained from emphasizing that studied ambiguity by glancing at her to observe its effect, but her silence told him that she must be thinking it over. The piquancy of waiting for her next approach added to the pleasure of what promised to be a most entertaining day.

"Sicily, fair Sicily!" he declaimed, before the pause could become uncomfortable. He waved one hand to embrace the sun-drenched splendor of orchards and hills: "The crossroads of the Mediterranean, where Greek fought Phoenician, and Roman fought Greek; where the light of Christendom was shadowed by the menace of Vandal, Goth, Byzantine, and Arab . . . You see, I've already boned up on the brochures."

"Is your name really Simon Templar?" she asked abruptly.

"It is. Let me guess why you ask. Head with history, your thoughts have leapt to the Knights Templar, a dubiously noble band not unknown in these parts. You're wondering whether I'm one of their linear

descendants. I think that depends where you draw the line. I've never looked too closely into all the birds' nests in my family tree, but —"

"Are you the Saint?"

Simon sighed.

"So you've discovered my guilty secret. I hoped to hide it from you, letting you believe that I was a simple salesman, a country-to-country drummer selling ball-point pens that only write under butter. Little did I dream that my shadier reputation would have penetrated the cloisters of your Alpine convent."

"I wasn't as cut off from the world as all that," she snapped, with a touch of exasperation. "I've always read newspapers, but I just didn't connect you at first. What are you doing here?"

"Sightseeing—wasn't that what we talked about? People always seem to disbelieve me, but I can truthfully say that I came to Italy just to look around and eat and drink like any other tourist."

"But when you're at home — you don't really go around selling pens?"

Few women could claim the distinction of having left the Saint bereft of a suitable rejoinder, and Gina may have been the first to achieve it unintentionally. But her question was perfectly serious, as he assured himself by a swift sidelong glance. Apparently her convent reading had been somewhat less catholic than she believed, and its lacunae had not been filled in by any recent briefing.

"No," he said weakly. "I don't really work at anything seriously, because I hate to take a job away from somebody who might need it."

That gave her something to think about in her turn, which occupied her until it occurred to her to ask: "Where are you going? I thought I was supposed to show you the sights, but you seem to know the way somewhere."

"I had breakfast with a map and a guide book," he said. "I thought it might help if the lamb could find its own way to the first sacrificial altar."

"I don't know of any of those near Palermo," she said seriously. "Very few of the pagan temples have survived it at all, and certainly no altars."

"Well, let's give this a whirl instead," said the Saint resignedly, as he came in sight of his first destination.

He pulled into the free public parking lot, and paid the local extortioner the customary blackmail for seeing that nobody walked off with his car or any of its detachable components.

"San Giovanni degli Eremiti!" Gina cried, clapping her hands

in enthusiastic recognition. "It's about the most romantic old church around here — it goes back to the Norman times. How clever of you to find it!"

"It's the natural affinity of one ancient monument for another," said the Saint, gazing up at the gray walls whose crumbling scars bore witness to the countless battles that had been fought around them. "I suppose we have to give this one the full treatment?"

He permitted himself to be led through the moldering glories of pillars and porticos, and what was unmistakably the remains of a mosque around which the thrifty Crusaders had constructed their own place of worship. When they finally arrived in a beautiful little cloister garden, he sank down on bower-shaded bench and drew Gina down beside him.

"It was a wonderful tour, and I can never thank you enough for showing me the antiquities of Palermo."

"But we've only just begun," she protested. "There are lots more churches — the Cathedral — the museum —"

"That's what I've been dreading. In spite of my name, I've always preferred to leave the churches and cathedrals to more deserving Saints. But we told your sweet old Aunt that we were going sightseeing, and now even you can look her in the eye and solemnly and truthfully swear that we did so. Thus having kept the letter of our word, we can turn to something more in keeping with the reality of this climate than tramping around a lot of sweltering ruins. Let's face it, if it weren't for me, would *you* be sightseeing today?"

"No, but —"

"But me no buts; the 'no' is quite enough. That means I'm inflicting something on you which you'd never have chosen, and I hate to be part of an infliction. Now, wouldn't you much rather be going for a swim?"

"Well, yes, perhaps. But I didn't think of bringing anything with me —"

"And you can't go back home for it without probably running afoul of Auntie. Never mind. Anyone who looks as sensational as you do in a bikini, should have a new one every day." Simon stood up. "Come along and prepare to revel in woman's time-honored pastime of buying clothes."

With no more delay for argument, the Bugatti was speeding on its way again in a few minutes. At the near-by seaside resort of Romagnolo they found a little beach shop which supplied the requisite minimum of water-wear; and in what seemed

like little more than the span of a movie lap-dissolve he was on the beach in his trunks watching her come out of her cabana in the nearest approach to the costume of Eve permitted by the customs of the time.

"I didn't see you bring anything," she observed belatedly.

"I didn't have to," he said without shame. "I had these in the car, just in case we accidentally decided to change our program. Now lets get in the water and cool off before you give heat-stroke to half the population of this *lido*."

They swam and splashed away the dust and stickiness of the morning, until they were completely refreshed and buttressed with a reserve of coolness to make another spell in the sun seem welcome for a while. As they came ashore, a white-coated *cameriere* greeted them at the water's edge.

"*Ecco la lista delle vivande, signore,*" he said, extending a menu. "I am sure you have already decided to lunch at the best restaurant on the beach."

Simon had already noticed a number of attractively shaded restaurants at the edge of the strand, and realized that the more enterprising of them were not proposing to leave the selection of possible customers to chance. Such initiative would have taken a fairly dedicated curmudgeon to resist.

"*Che cosa raccomandate?*" he asked.

"Everything is good, but the lobster is most excellent. Do not move, and I will show you.'

The waiter rushed away, to return in a few minutes with a wire basket in which a couple of lively *aragoste* squirmed and flapped in futile rebellion against their destiny.

"I suppose they could get to be a monotonous diet, if you lived here long enough," Simon said, "but I'm a long way from reaching that stage yet. How about you, Gina?'

"Donna Maria isn't an extravagant housekeeper," she said. "So they're still a treat for me."

"Then we'll make this an occasion," he said, and proceeded to round out the order.

The waiter departed again, promising to send for them when everything was ready; and they spread their rented towels on the sand and sprawled on them in sybaritic relaxation

"At times like this," said the Saint, "I often wonder who was the fathead who first proclaimed that work was a noble and rewarding activity. Or was he a really brilliant fellow who thought of a line to kid the suckers into doing the dirty jobs and liking it?"

"But you must work at something, don't you?' she said after a pause.

"As seldom as possible."

"But you told us you had business with Uncle Alessandro."

"Do I look like a type of character who would have business with him?"

"No," she said emphatically, and then was instantly appalled and open-mouthed. "I mean —"

He grinned.

"You mean exactly what you said," he insisted gently. "I never did convince you that I was part of the original commercial world, and since then you've remembered more of what you've read or heard about some of my adventures, which your educational background would have to regard as slightly nefarious. In spite of which, you apparently know that Uncle Al's private line of skullduggery is much worse than anything a comparatively respectable buccaneer like me would be mixed up in."

"I didn't say that at all!" she flared. "I know everyone says he made his money in rum-running or rackets or some of the other things you have in the United States, and I know he was in trouble with the police about taxes or something. It was in all the papers when I was at school, and the other girls teased me to death because I had the same name. I didn't dare admit he was a relation. But since then he's told me that all the best people dealt with him, only the Americans are so hypocritical, and he just happened to run up against the wrong politicians. And he's always been so good to us —"

"So when he talked to you on the phone late last night or early this morning and told you he was afraid I meant him some harm, and asked you to use our date to try to find out all that you could about me and what I was cooking, you felt it was your duty to take on the job."

For a moment her eyes flashed with the instinctive threat of another and even more indignant denial; and then the fire was quenched in a traitorous upwelling of moisture that she could not voluntarily control. Her lip trembled, and she dropped her face suddenly in her hands.

Simon patted her sympathetically on the shoulder.

"Don't take it so hard," he said. "You just haven't had much experience with the Mata Hari bit."

"You're a beast," she sobbed.

"No I'm not. I'm a nice friendly bloke who hates to refuse a beautiful girl anything. To prove it, I'll answer all your questions anyhow."

The soft satin under his hand shook with another muted tremor which was somehow distractingly exciting, but he made himself go on single-mindedly:

"No I am not a policeman. No, I am not working for the FBI,

or any agency of the government. Yes, I have the worst intentions towards your Uncle Alessandro. I think he's a very evil man and that he may be guilty of a number of murders besides lesser crimes; but there's one murder I'm morally certain he's responsible for, which I'm going to see that he pays for in one way or another. Unless he succeeds in having me murdered first, which he's already tried a couple of times."

She sat up abruptly, and he reflected that only the very very young could still look lovely with reddened eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

"That's enough," she said. "You'd better take me home now."

"Not until after lunch. Could you live with the knowledge that you'd sentenced one of those lobsters to die for nothing?"

"I expect you can eat them both."

"Why should I risk indigestion because you don't like to hear the truth?"

"I can't listen to you! It would be too disloyal. It's my family you're talking about, calling Alessandro a murderer. I want to go home."

"Then wouldn't you feel better," said the Saint deliberately, "if Al Destamio wasn't really your uncle after all?"

The shot scored, more violently even than he had hoped. Gina's reaction ran the gamut of all the conventional symptoms of shock, from staring eyes and sagging jaw to the cataleptic rigidity in which all her responses were frozen. After such a visible impact, there could be no return to pretense or hauteur.

"So—you know," she breathed finally.

"I can't go quite that far," he said candidly. "I suspect. I can't prove it — yet. But I think I shall. I need help. And I think you could give it. Now you've as good as told me, haven't you, that you've suspected the same thing."

His blue eyes held her steadily, like magic crystals defying her to try to deceive them; but this time she made no attempt to escape their penetration.

"Yes," she said. "For a long time. But I was afraid to believe it, because I knew how much I *hoped* it was true. And that seemed awful, somehow."

"But if it turned out we were right," he continued — and the subtle assimilation of their interests into the inclusive "we" was so smooth that she probably never even noticed it, "it'd be rather like the start of a new life for you."

"Yes, it would."

"Then what's your problem? Al is asking you to get involved in what you're afraid is more dirty business. You've got sus-

picions which you can't take to the police, because you're afraid of being wrong, or of what it might mean to your family name. I'm not the police, but I have a corny bee in my bonnet about justice. I think I'm your obvious answer, sent directly from heaven."

"I think you're wonderful," she said, and leaned over and kissed him with impulsive warmth.

Simon Templar recorded a vivid impression that her stretch in a convent had effected no irremedial inhibitations on her Mediterranean instincts.

"*La Pasta e pronta,*" said the too-helpful waiter, with impeccable timing.

The dining room was nothing more than a verandah shaded with cane matting, overlooking the beach and the sea, with the kitchen and other working quarters in the stucco building that backed it up. The substitute for a cellar appeared to be an immense glass-fronted refrigerator from which the wine came mountain-cold as it should be in such a climate, especially one of the sturdy Sicilian type. The meal itself made a commendable effort to live it up to its advance billing, and would have justified interrupting almost anything except what it had actually cut short. But at least it gave the Saint an opportunity to hear the rest of Gina's confession from a slightly less disturbing distance.

"It's just . . . well, a feeling that's been growing through the years. At first it seemed so fantastic that I tried to laugh it off. But the small things added up to a big thing that I couldn't put out of my mind. Now I look back, it must have all begun about the time Uncle Alessandro was so sick in Rome. I told you that I only remember that part vaguely, because I was very small. I know he had cancer, and I thought they said it was incurable; but now Donna Maria says I'm wrong, it wasn't cancer at all, and he got better. Is that possible?"

"It's not impossible. Doctors have been mistaken. And there have been what you might call cures — by surgery, or radiation, or even what they call spontaneous remissions, which means that the doctors don't know why the patient was cured, but he was.

"But not very often?"

"Not very often after the case has been called incurable, that've lasted as long as since you were a little girl, and with the patient looking as hearty as Al did the other day."

"Then I happened to notice that there weren't any pictures of Uncle Alessandro in any of

the family albums, when he was younger. When I asked Donna Maria, she said that when he was younger he was superstitious about being photographed and would never let himself be taken."

"Perhaps he had a premonition about when he would have his picture taken with a number under it," Simon remarked.

"And then a girl whom I used to be taken out with, because her mother was an old friend of Donna Maria, who always finds the nastiest things to say about everyone and yet you usually have to admit they're true, once said that Uncle Alessandro's cure must have been more in his mind than his body, if he did so well in business in America, when all he ever did here in Italy was to throw away most of the family fortune."

"Is that what he did?"

"Oh, yes. Even Lo Zio, when it wasn't so hard for him to talk, told me how foolish he was and some of the crazy schemes he threw money away on. And I couldn't believe he had become such a different man."

Simon nodded.

"Unless he *is* a different man."

"But how *could* he be? Unless Lo Zio —"

"Who, let's face it, isn't so very bright these days —"

"And Donna Maria —"

"Yes, she would have to be in on it." The Saint held her eyes remorselessly. "And don't try to tell me you can't possibly imagine such a dear sweet old lady being involved in anything dishonest."

She made no attempt to evade the challenge; it was as if she had grown up, in one way, very suddenly. She only asked: But why?"

"When we know that," he said, "we'll have a lot of answers."

After a while she said: "You want me to trust you, but you still haven't told me much about yourself, only the things you're not. If you are aren't a detective, how did you get so interested in Uncle Alessandro?"

His hesitation was only momentary, more to marshall his recollections than to make up his mind whether or not to share them with her. After all, even if she was an extraordinarily unsuspected Delilah, capable of far more deviousness and duplicity than one could easily credit her, and this whole last performance was only another trick to gain his confidence, there was very little he could tell her that would be news to Al Destamio, or that would help the Mafia to frustrate his investigations.

Therefore he told her his whole story, from the accidental

meeting with the late James Euston to the plastic bomb which he had disarmed the night before, omitting only his private luncheon conversation with Marco Ponti and his disposal of the plastic with the fingerprints on it, since even if she had come over whole-heartedly to his side those items of information might be tricked or forced out of her. At the end of the recital she was big-eyed and open-mouthed again.

"I can hardly believe it — a bomb, and right outside our house, while we were having dinner!"

"A very sensible time to do it. You should try planting a bomb in a car without being noticed, when somebody's sitting in it, driving at sixty miles an hour."

All this talk was not quite as consecutive as it reads, having been spread over several courses with the necessary breaks for tasting, sipping, chewing, absorbing, and cogitating, and interruptions by the waiter for serving and changing plates and appealing for approbation.

It was later still after another of those pauses divided between gastronomic appreciation and the separate pursuit of their own thoughts, that Gina said: "I did think of a way once to settle whether Uncle Alessandro really is the same man as my uncle, but of course I never had the nerve to do it."

"If that's all it takes, it's practically done. People are always complaining that I've got too much nerve. Let me offer you some of my surplus. What do we do with it?"

"It's so simple, actually. If my uncle is dead, and this man is an impostor, the real uncle will be buried in the family vault. We just have to open it and look."

The Saint frowned.

"Does that follow automatically? Wouldn't they be more likely to have buried him somewhere else, under another name?"

"Oh, no! I can't believe that they'd go as far as that. You don't know how traditional everything is in Sicily, especially with an old family like mine. Even if Donna Maria and Lo Zio allowed this Alessandro Destamio to pretend to be my uncle, for money or any other reason — and he couldn't do it without their help — nothing would make them allow my real uncle to be buried under a false name and outside the vault where all the Destamios have been buried for three hundred years. It would be almost like committing sacrilege!"

Simon pondered this, pursuing a last exquisite tidbit with delicately determined knife and fork. It was psychologically be-

lievable. And the Mafia could easily have arranged to satisfy the orthodox scruples of the close relatives concerned, with a captive doctor to juggle a death certificate and *a mafioso* priest to preside over a midnight interment.

It was a possibility. And the best prospect in sight at that moment for another breakthrough.

"Would you be a party to cracking the ancestral mausoleum?" he asked. "Or at least show me where it is and turn your back?"

"I'll go with you," she said.

The meal came to an end at last with fresh yellow peaches at their peak of luscious ripeness, after which Gina accepted coffee but the Saint declined it, preferring to finish with the clean taste of the fruit and a final glass of wine.

"When you're finished," he said, "I think we might throw on some clothes and run over and case the joint — if you'll excuse the expression. Anyhow we can't go swimming again right away after gorging ourselves like this."

Thus after a while they were driving back again almost into Palermo, then swinging out again under Gina's directions while the Saint registered every turning on a mental map that would retrace the route unhesitatingly whenever he called on it, by night or day. In daylight, the fine stand of yew-trees which landmark all cemeteries in Italy loomed up as an early beacon to their destination; and when they had almost reached it, a funeral cortege debouching from a dusty side road completed the identification while at the same time effectively blocking all further progress.

The hearse, unlike the dachshund-bodied Cadillacs beloved of American morticians, was a superbly medieval juggernaut towering a good ten feet from the ground, decorated with carved flowers, fruit, and cherubs framing glass panes the size of shop windows which gave a clear view of the coffin within and its smothering mantle of flowers. It was towed by two trudging black horses in harness to match, their heads bent under the weight of huge plumes of the same stygian hue.

Behind it followed a shuffling parade of mourners. First the women, identically garbed in rusty black dresses with black scarves over their heads, bearing either long-stemmed flowers or candles: this was a big outing for them, and there was not a dry eye in the column. Then came the men — a few in their black Sunday suits, doubtless the next of kin, while the rest were more comfortable in

their shirtsleeves, to which some of them added the respectful touch of black bands on the upper arm. Many of the latter made no pretense of ceremonial gloom, but dawdled along in animated conversation as if they had attached themselves to the procession merely from a temporary lack of any other attraction, or because a social obligation required their presence but not any uncontrollable display of grief.

Simon stopped the car by the roadside and said: "We might as well walk from here, instead of dragging behind them."

He helped Gina out, and they easily overtook the phalanx of the bereaved without unseemly s c u r r y i n g, and squeezed past it through the cemetery gates. He looked closely at the gates as he went through, and saw that there was no lock on them: it was unlikely that they would ever be secured in any way, though they might be kept shut at other times to keep stray dogs out.

"Our vault is over there," Gina said, pointing.

It was not so much a vault as a mausoleum, occupying a whole large corner of the graveyard, an edifice of granite and marble so imposing that at first Simon had taken it for some kind of chapel. The entrance was a door made of bronze bars that would have served very well as the gateway of a jail; beyond it, what looked at first like a narrow passageway led straight through the middle of the building to a small altar at the other end backed by a stained-glass window just big enough to admit a modicum of suitably sepulchral light. It was not until after a second or two, when his eyes adapted to the gloom, that he realized that the passageway was in fact only a constricted maneuvering space between the banks of serried individual sarcophagi stacked one upon the other like courses of great bricks which in places rose all the way to the ceiling.

"It seems to have gotten a bit crowded," he remarked. "I wouldn't say there was room for more than a couple more good generations. Do you have your nook picked out, or is it a case of first gone, first served?"

She shivered in spite of the warmth of the air.

"I don't understand jokes like that," she said stiffly; and he was reminded that in spite of everything that had drawn them together there were still distances between them that might never be bridged.

He gave his attention to the lock on the bronze gate, which had a keyhole almost big enough to receive his finger.

"Who has the key?" he asked.

"Donna Maria?"

"I expect so. But I don't know where I'd look for it. I could try to find out —"

"I'm afraid that might take too long. But you needn't bother. Now that I've seen the lock, I know exactly what I need to open it. Unfortunately I don't have the tool in my pocket. And anyhow, this doesn't seem to be quite the ideal moment to start making burglarious motions." He indicated the tag-end of the funeral party, whose easily distracted concentration was now unfairly divided between the goings-on at the graveside where the hearse had halted and the contrastingly lively loveliness of Gina in her outrageously figure-moulding cotton dress. "Let's pass the time driving back to a shop where I can buy what we need."

After he had made his purchase, he suggested another swim to cool off again. Caution dictated a nocturnal return to the cemetery, when the risk of attracting unwanted attention would be practically eliminated, and meanwhile he wanted to keep Gina's mind from dwelling too much on the prospect. But the sun was still a hand's breadth from setting when she said: "If we don't go back to the vault now, you'll have to take me home."

"I don't want to go until after dark," he said. "I thought we might drift along somewhere for an aperitif and maybe an early dinner first."

She shook her head.

"I can't have dinner with you," she said. "If I don't get home before it's dark, Donna Maria will be exploding. And she'd certainly never let me go out with you again, even if Uncle Alessandro asked her to."

Simon thought about this for a moment, and was surprisingly undepressed by the further reminder of the problems of romance in the land of Romeo and Juliet. Much as he would have liked to spend more time with Gina, a tombtapping excursion would not have been his own choice of an occasion for her companionship.

"I guess you're right," he said. "And I know you weren't really looking forward to joining me in a game of ghouls. Get dressed again, and we'll make sure that Auntie has no reason to disintegrate."

She was rather silent on the drive back to the manse; but after a while she said: "What shall I tell them I found out about you?"

"Everything I told you at lunch, if you like. But of course nothing about our plan to check up on the vault."

"Then what shall I say your plans are?"

"Tell 'em you couldn't find out. Tell 'em I hinted that I'd got some sensational scheme up my sleeve, but I refused to talk about it . . . Yes, that's perfect—you can say that you think you could break me down, if you had just a little more time to work on me, and that we made a date for more sightseeing tomorrow. Then you can be sure that they won't just let you keep it, they'll beg you to."

The Bugatti stopped at the forbidding gates; and Simon came around the car and gave her a hand to dismount, and held on to it after the assistance was no longer needed.

"Till tomorrow, then," she said, with her intense dark eyes lingering on his face as if she wanted to learn it again feature by feature.

But when he bent to kiss her, she drew back with subtle skill, releasing her hand quickly and hurrying to the inset door, from which she turned to throw him another of her intoxicating smiles before she disappeared.

Verily, he thought, the conquest of Gina Destamio could be something like crossing the Alps by a goat trail on a bicycle with hexagonal wheels. . .

However, both remembrance and anticipation continued to weave her image through his thoughts during the aperitif and the dinner which he had to enjoy alone, and were only relegated to the background at the same time when he decided that the cemetery should have become as deserted and safely set up for violation as it would ever be.

Then he became purely professional. And as far as he was concerned, any similarity of his mission to the themes of gothic novels or horror movies was purely coincidental. To him, the mausoleum was just another crib to be cracked, and a much easier prospect than many that he had tackled.

He drove the Bugatti past the cemetery entrance and around the next corner before he parked it, and came silently back on foot. The moon which had been so helpful the night before was up again, giving perhaps more light than he would have ordered if the specifications had been left to him, but in compensation it made complete concealment almost as difficult for any remotely possible bushwhacker as it was for him. There was, however, most literally no other sign of life in the vicinity, and the only sound was the rustle of leaves in the hesitant breeze.

The wrought-iron gates were closed but not locked, as he had anticipated, and opened with only a slight creak. Crossing to the Destamio mausoleum, he automatically gave a wide berth

to the tombs and headstones which were big enough for a man to skulk behind, and probed the shadows behind them with cat eyes as he passed; but that perfunctory precaution seemed to be in fact as unnecessary as the backward glances which he threw over alternate shoulders at brief irregular intervals while he worked on the lock which secured the bronze grille door of the vault. It succumbed to his sensitive manipulations in less than three minutes, and with a last wary look behind him he passed through into the alley between the piled-up ranks of stone caskets; and there for the first time he had to bring out his pocket flashlight to begin deciphering the inscriptions on their ends.

Then there was an instant of intense pain in the back of his head, and a coruscating blackness rose up and swallowed him.

A distant throbbing, as of some gargantuan tom-tom pulsating deep in the earth, thudded and swelled. An indefinite time passed before Simon became aware that the hammering drum was in his own head, and that each percussion was accompanied by a red surge of agony. He fought down the pain with his growing consciousness until after an immeasurable battle he had subjugated it enough to be able to receive other impressions.

His face was pressed against something rough and dusty that smelled of goats, and when he tried to move his head and change position he realized that his hands were bound behind his back. It took an additional effort of will to force himself to lie still while a modicum of strength flowed back into his body and the cobwebs cleared sluggishly from his brain.

It was painfully obvious that he had been hit on the head, like any numb-skulled private eye in a bosom-and-bludgeon paperback; and what made it hurt more was the proof that, for such a thing to have happened, he had to have been outthought. He still fancied himself long past the stage where anyone could sneak up behind and cosh him if he was even minimally on his guard, as he had been at the cemetery. But now it dawned on him belatedly that he had been tricked by the simple fact of having had to pick the lock of the mausoleum grille, which had subconsciously blinded him to the possibility that someone else might have arrived before him and locked the gate again from inside. Someone who could then have crouched in the total darkness atop one of the banks of coffins and waited patiently for him to

pass through the passageway below . . .

After which came the question: how could the ambush have been planned with such accurate expectation of his arrival?

A door opened near by, and heavy footsteps clacked across a tile floor and stopped beside him.

"Al," said the Saint at a venture, "if you wanted to see me again so badly, why didn't you just send me an ordinary invitation?"

A familiar rumbling grunt confirmed his guess.

It took a great effort to move, for any motion started the trip-hammers going again inside his cranium, but he forced himself to roll over so that his face was out of the filthy blanket. The scene thus revealed scarcely seemed worth the agony. He was in a small whitewashed room lighted by a singled naked bulb, with a single door and a single window covered by a soiled skimpy curtain. There was no furniture except the cot on which he lay. A sizeable part of this dreary setting was obscured by the form of Al Destamio looming over him like a jellied mountain of menace.

"Don't waste your time on the jokes," growled the mountain. "You just start tellin' me what I wanta know, an' maybe you won't get hurt no more than you are now."

Simon squirmed up into a sitting position with his back to the wall, and only a faint spangling of sweat on his forehead revealed what the exertion cost him. Destamio saw nothing but a smile of undaunted mockery, and rage rose in his throat.

"You gonna talk or you gonna give trouble?"

"I love to talk, Al," said the Saint soothingly. "Nobody ever accused me of being tongue-tied. What would you like to chat about? Or should I start off by congratulating you on the way you got me here? — wherever this is. It's been quite a few years now since I let myself get sapped like that. But having your boy lock himself *inside* that crypt and wait for me to burgle my way in was a real sneaky switch. I must remember that one."

"You'll be lucky if you live long enough to remember anything."

"Well, I've always been rather lucky, Al. A guy has to be, when he isn't brilliant like you —"

The words were cut off as Destamio lashed out with his slab-sized hand and dealt the Saint a crashing blow on the side of the head, jarring him sideways, the heavy ring splitting the skin of his cheek.

"No jokes, I told you Saint.

You wanna be smart, you give the right answers an' make it easy for yourself"

Simon shook his head, trying to arrest the internal pounding which the clout had started up again.

"But I meant it sincerely, Al," he said in a most reasonable tone, though the ice in his blue eyes would have chilled anyone more sensitive than the post-graduate goon confronting him. "It was really brilliant of you to figure out that my next move would be to check the names in your family bone-box. Or did Gina tell you?"

"Did she know?"

The Saint could have bitten his tongue off. Now if Gina hadn't betrayed him, he had betrayed her. It showed that the after-effects of the knock-out had left him more befuddled than he had realized.

"I didn't mean it that way," he tried to recover. "I meant, did you think of it all by yourself, or did she help you? She's smart enough to have an inspiration like that, judging by the way she was trying to pump me all day. But I didn't tell her, because I'm not such a dope that I couldn't guess what she was after."

Destamio stared at him inscrutably. For all his crudities, the racketeer was as quick as a whip; and it was no more than a toss-up, at the most optimistic, whether he would be taken in by the Saint's attempt to retrieve his slip.

"I wanta know lotsa more things you didn't tell her," Destamio said. "What was it you figured to spill to the cops, like you threatened me, if you thought I was trying to have you knocked off again? An' how you figure to do that now?"

"That's easy," Simon answered.. "It's all written down and sealed in an envelope which will be delivered to the proper place whenever the person who's taking care of it doesn't hear from me at certain regular times. I know that's one of the oldest gimmicks in the business, but it's still a corker. And don't think you can force me to call this person and say I'm okay, because if I don't use the right code words he'll know that somebody's twisting my arm."

"I think you're bluffing," Destamio said coldly. "But it don't matter. Before I'm through, you'll tell me who's got this envelope, an' what the code is."

"You think so?"

Destamio met the Saint's level and unflinching gaze for several motionless seconds; and then a throaty chuckle came up from some source around his diaphragm like the grumbling sound of an earthquake, and

opened the fissure of his lipless mouth as it emerged.

"You don't have to tell me you're tough. I seen plenty guys worked over in different ways, an' a few of 'em never did sing. But we don't have to work that way no more. We got scientific ways to loosen you up, an' what's more we'll know you're tellin' the truth. So since I don't have to make no promises I ain't gonna keep, like I would if I was gonna work you over in the old way, I can tell you we're just gonna give you a little shot in the arm, an' after you spill everything I'm gonna blow your brains out myself."

He went to the door and called out: "*Entra, dottore!*"

Simon Templar knew the feeling of a sinking heart, and not merely as a metaphor. Al Destamio was certainly not bluffing. In those enlightened days, there was no longer any practical need for the clumsy instruments of the medieval torture chamber, or even their more modern electrical refinements: there were drugs available which when injected into a vein would induce a state of relaxed euphoria in which the victim would happily babble his most precious secrets. Even the Saint, with all his courage and determination, could not resist that chemical coercion. Grinning idiotically, he would tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth — and once he had done that, God help him.

The man who came in was stocky and plump, although on nothing like the same scale as Destamio. He was younger, and his dewlaps were freshly shaved and powdered, his hands soft and pink; his double-breasted suit was dark blue, and his shoes, though sharply pointed, an even more conservative black. The expression on his slightly porcine features was wise and solemn, as befitted one whose trade was based upon reminders of mortality: he did not need the universal symbol of the black satchel, which he nevertheless carried with him, to identify it.

"Is this the patient?" he asked, as if he were making the most routine of house calls.

"I am if you want to prescribe something for a mild concussion, and a long cold drink to wash it down," Simon said. "If you've hired yourself out for anything else, you must have dedicated yourself to hypocrisy — not Hippocrates."

The doctor's expresion did not alter as he put down his bag on the floor and opened it.

"Do you have any allergies?" he asked with stolid conscientiousness. "Sodium pentothal sometimes has side reactions, but then again so does scopolamine. It is sometimes difficult

to decide which is best to use."

"My worst allergy is to medical quacks," said the Saint. "But I don't want to be unfair. Perhaps you're wonderful with horses."

"*Affrettati, dottore,*" growled Destamio impatiently.

The physician was unperturbed by either of them. Taking his own time, he brought out a vial of clear fluid and a hypodermic, filled the syringe, and went through the standard procedure of forcing a small jet of liquid through the upraised needle to remove any trapped bubbles of air — a somewhat finicky precaution, it seemed, considering that Destamio's announced program would be more positively lethal than any accidentally introduced embolism.

The Saint was turning his wrists over behind him, testing the bonds that held them. They were tied with a piece of light rope which was soft and supple with age, and there was stretch in it which could be exploited by setting his arms in certain positions known to escape artists, to gain the maximum leverage, and then applying all the power of his exceptional muscles to it. He knew that he could release himself eventually, but it would take at least several minutes. His legs, however, were not bound; and as the doctor approached Simon braced himself and measured the distance for a vicious kick which if it found its target would indubitably cause quite an interregnum in the scheduled porceedings. By fair means or foul, no matter how foul, he had to win that essential time. . .

Time was given to him, miraculously, by a man who looked like anything but an agent of Providence, who flung open the door at that precise moment and rattled a sentence in dialect at Destamio. Simon could not understand a word of it, but it had an instantaneous effect on its recipient that would have been envied by Paul Revere. Destamio spun around with a single grating oath, and waddled to the door with grotesque celerity.

"Wait until I get back," he spat over his shoulder as he went out.

Simon watched as the doctor carefully put down the hypodermic inside his bag and strolled over to the window. He drew aside the dingy curtain and threw open the casement, giving the Saint an unimpeded view of the night sky. The lack of bars on the opening was like a symbol, and Simon felt a sudden new surge of hope. Behind his back his arms writhed and strained in desperate but disciplined haste as he did everything he could to profit by the

Heaven-sent reprieve, while at the same time avoiding any struggles violent enough to attract attention.

"What is the excitement about, *dottore?*" he asked, less in expectation of an answer than to cover the small sounds of his contortions.

"It is Don Pasquale," the doctor said, his back to Simon as he continued to inhale the fresh air. "He is very old and very sick, and there are two other *medici* here besides myself to prove again that science can make old age more comfortable but never cure it."

"You must excuse my ignorance, but who is this Don Pasquale? And why does he get such a special fuss made over him?"

The doctor turned and looked at him couriously.

"Your ignorance is indeed surprising, for a man who has information that the Mafia seems to want very badly. Don Pasquale is the head of the organization, and when he dies they will have to elect a new Don. That is why the leaders are all here."

"The vultures gather . . ." Simon tried to keep any sign of effort from his face, while his sinews flexed and corded like steel wire. "And I suppose my fat friend would love to become Don Alessandro."

"I doubt if he will be chosen. He has been out of the country too long. Here in the South we tend to be rather provincial, and a little suspicious of all things foreign."

"That never seems to have stopped you exporting your *mafiosi* missionaries to less insular parts, such as the United States. I should think the organization would welcome a new top thug with international experience"

The doctor shrugged impassively. Either he was too discreet to be baited into further discussion, or he was genuinely uninterested in anything the Saint could possibly contribute. He continued to gaze at Simon as impersonally as he would have contemplated an anatomical chart, and the Saint goaded his brain frantically to think of some other gambit that might divert attention from the movements that he had to keep on making.

Then both of them turned as the door opened again. It was the messenger who had called Destamio away who reappeared.

"*Tu,*" he said to the Saint, in understandable Italian. "Come with me."

"*Il signor* Destamio wants him here for medical treatment," the doctor interposed, without expression.

"It will have to wait," said

the man curtly. "It is Don Pasquale who sends for him."

At this revelation the doctor pointedly lost interest again, and devoted himself to closing up his satchel as the emissary pulled Simon to his feet. The Saint for his part submitted to the new orders with the utmost docility, not only because it would have required the apathy of a turnip to resist such an intriguing summons, but also to avoid giving his escort any reason to re-check the rope on his wrists.

The tie was loosening, but it would still take him several more minutes to get free. He would have to wait for that time.

They went down a long musty whitewashed corridor with other closed doors in it, then up a flight of stone stairs which brought them into an enormous kitchen, from which another short passage and another doorway led into a vast baroque hall heavy with tapestries, paintings, suits of armor, and ponderously ornate woodwork. He realized then that the cell where he had revived was only an ignoble storage room in the basement of what could legitimately be called a *palazzo*. There was a floating population of dark men in tight suits with bulging armpits, all of them with fixed expressions of congenital unfriendliness. No further proof was needed that he had penetrated to the very heart of the enemy's camp, although not quite in the manner he would have chosen for himself.

The messenger pushed him towards the baronial stairway that came down to the center of the hall. They went up to a gallery, from which he was steered through a pair of half-open oak portals into a somber ante-room. Beyond it, an almost equally imposing inner door stood closed, and the guide tapped lightly on it. There was no reply from the interior, but he did not seem to expect one, for he turned the handle quietly and pulled the door open. Remaining outside himself, he gave the Saint a last shove which sent him in.

Simon found himself in a bedroom that was in full proportion to the other master rooms he had seen, panelled in dark red brocade and cluttered with huge and hideous pieces of age-darkened furniture. The windows were carefully sealed against the noxious vapors of the night, and effectively sealed in the half-stale half-antiseptic odors of the sickroom. Next to the high canopied bed stood an enameled metal table loaded with a pharmaceutical-looking assortment of bottles and supplies, over which hovered two men with the same unmistakably professional air as

the medico who had been brought to Simon's cell, one of them gaunt and gray and the other one short and black-goateed.

The other men grouped around the bed were older, and had a subtle aura of individual authority in spite of their deference to the central figure in the tableau. There were four of them, ranging in age from the late fifties upwards. The eldest, perhaps, was Al Destamio. There was a stout smooth-faced man with glasses who could have passed for a cosmopolitan business executive, and one with cruel eyes and the build of a wrestler whose thick mustache gave him a pseudo-military air. The youngest, at least from the impression of nervous vigor which he gave, was almost as tall and trim-waisted as the Saint, but overbalanced by a beak which an Andean condor might justifiably have envied. Although modelled on classical Roman lines, it expanded and enlarged the theme on a heroic scale which would have made General De Gaulle look almost pudding-faced. And having apparently conceded to his shaving mirror that there was nothing he could do to minimize it, he wore it with a defiance that would have delighted Cyrano de Bergerac.

This was the inner circle, the peers in their own right, assembled at the death-bed of the King to pay him homage — and vie among themselves for the succession.

They turned and looked at the Saint with a single concerted motion, as if they were wired together, leaving an open path to the bed.

At the zenith of his powers, the man who lay there must have been a giant, judging by the breadth of his frame. But some wasting disease had clutched him, stripping away tissue, bringing him down to this bed in which he must soon die. That much was obvious; the marks of approaching dissolution were heavy upon him. The skin once taut with muscle now hung in loose folds on his neck. Black marks like smeared soot were painted under the sunken eyes, and the gray hair lay thin and lifeless across the mottled brow. Yet, sick as he was, the habit of command had not left him. His eyes burned with the intensity of a madman or a martyr; and his voice, though weakened, had the vibrant timbre of an operatic basso.

"Vieni qui."

It was not a request, or even an order, so much as the spoken assurance of knowledge that obedience would follow. This was the way that absolute monarchs of the past must have

spoken, who had the power of life and death over their subjects, and Don Pasquale was one of the last heirs to that kind of authority.

Nevertheless, Simon reminded himself, it was no honorable kingdom of which he was supreme ruler, but a ruthless secret society for which no crime was too sordid if it showed sufficient profit. Viewed in that light, the regal-cathedral atmosphere of the gathering was too incongruous for the Saint's basic irreverence. He moved up to the foot of the bed, as he was told, but with a lazy trace of swagger that made it seem as if his hands were clasped behind his back of his own choice instead of being tied there, and a smile of brazen mockery curled his lips.

"*Ciao, Pasquale,*" he said cheerfully, as one buddy to another.

He could feel the chieftains on either side of him wince and stiffen incredulously at this *lese-majeste,* but the man propped up on the pillows did not even seem to notice it, perhaps because he could not fully believe that he had heard it, or because in his assured supremacy it meant no more to him than an urchin thumbing its nose.

"So you are the one they call the Saint. You have given us trouble before."

"I am pleased that it was enough for you to notice," Simon said. "But I don't remember the occasion. What were you doing at the time?"

Since Don Pasquale had addressed him with the familiar "*tu*", which is used only to inferiors or intimates, Simon saw no reason not to respond in the same manner.

"You interfered with some plans of Unciello, who was one of us. And we had a useful man in the police in Rome, an Inspector Buono, whom we lost because of you."

"Now it comes back to me," said the Saint. "I have an unfortunate knack of crossing up crooked cops. What ever happened to the poor grafter?"

"He got in trouble in jail. A knife fight. He is dead."

Don Pasquale still had the memory of a computer. All the threads of a world-wide network of crime led back to him, and he controlled it because he knew the exact length and strength of every single one. More than ten years had passed since that incident in Rome, but he had not forgotten any of the details.

"What has the Saint done now, Alessandro?"

"He is trying to make trouble for me," Destamio said. "He has followed me, spied on me, gone to my family and questioned them, threatened to blackmail me. I have to find out what he

knows, and who else knows it, and then get rid of him."

"That may be; but why bring him here?"

"I thought it was the safest place, and besides I did not want to be away myself at this time —"

"What information could the Saint have that he could possibly blackmail Alessandro with?"

It was a new voice that broke in, and Destamio started visibly at the sound of it. It came from the man with the majestic proboscis whom Simon had already intuitively assessed as the most dynamic of the council.

"Nothing, Cirano, nothing at all," Destamio replied, his voice sounding a trifle hoarser than usual. "But I want to know why he thinks he can give me trouble, who he is working with, so that I can take care of everything."

The man called Cirano—probably a nickname rather than a fortunate choice by his parents — turned his fascinating beak towards Destamio and actually sniffed, as if all his power of perception were brought to focus is that incredible olfactory organ.

"If he cannot be dangerous, what are you afraid of, Alessandro?" he persisted mercilessly. "What is there to take care of?"

"Basta!" Don Pasquale interrupted Destamio's retort before it even came to voice. "You can wait to fight with each other after I am dead. Until then, I make the decisions."

His lips barely moved when he talked, and there was no sign of animation or emotion on the pallid face. Only the eyes were indomitably alive, and they fastened on the Saint again with a concentration which could almost be physically felt.

"I have long wanted to see you, Simon Templar," he said still in the clear correct Italian which seemed to be used as a neutral language to bridge the differences of dialect that must have existed between some of those present, and which can make a Sicilian just as unintelligible to a Calabrian as to any foreigner. "Nobody who defies the Mafia lives so long afterwards as you have. You should have been eliminated before you left Rome, after you crossed Unciello. Yet here you are crossing us again. I should be telling Alessandro to waste no more time in putting you out of the way. But in the meantime I have heard and learned much more about you. I am not sure that you must inevitably be our enemy. With our power behind you, you could have become many times richer than you are. With your cleverness and your daring, we might have become even greater."

The room was deathly silent. Even at the end of his reign, Don Pasquale remained the unchallenged autocrat by sheer force of will-power and tradition. The satraps around him were still only his lieutenants, and would remain subservient until his extinction unleashed the new battle for supremacy.

"Do you mean," Simon asked slowly, "that after all that, you would offer me a chance to join you?"

"It is not impossible," Don Pasquale said. "Such things happen in the world. Even great nations which have been bitter enemies become allies."

The Saint hesitated for an instant, while a score of possibilities flashed back and forth across his mind like bolts of lightning, speculating on what use he could make of such a fantastic offer and how far he might play it along.

But for once the bronze mask of his face was no more defense than a shell of clear glass against the searching stare that dwelt on it.

"But no," Don Pasquale said, before he could even formulate a response. "You are thinking only of how you might turn it to your advantage, to escape from the position you are now in. That is why I had to see you, to have your answer myself. *L'udienza e finita.*"

Without affectation, he used the same words to declare the audience finished that would have come from a king or a pope.

Al Destamio grabbed the Saint and hustled him to the door with what might have seemed like almost inordinate zeal, and Don Pasquale spoke again.

"Wait here one moment, Alessandro."

Destamio gave the Saint a push which sent him stumbling up against the messenger who waited outside, and snapped: "Take him back downstairs and lock him in."

The massive door slammed shut; and the guide grasped Simon's arm at the elbow and propelled him forcefully across the ante-room, along the gallery, and down the magnificent stairway with such brutal vigor that it took all the Saint's agility to keep his footing and save himself from being hurled down the steps on his face.

In the same bullying manner, he was marched through the kitchen, down the back stairs, and along the basement corridor to the room from which he had been brought. But at that especial moment he almost welcomed the sadistic treatment, for under cover of a natural resistance to it he was able to wrestle more vigorously and concentrat-

edly with the rope that held his wrists.

A last brutal kick with his escort's knee sent him flying into the little cell. The door banged behind him, and the key grated in the lock.

He was alone again, for the doctor had not waited; but he knew it would not be for long. Whatever business the dying Don Pasquale wanted to conclude with Destamio could not take more than a short while, and then Destamio would be in even more haste to complete his own project.

But alone and unobserved, the Saint could writhe and struggle without restraint; and he already had a good start . . .

In less than three minutes he dragged one hand free, and the cord was slack on his other wrist.

Even while it was falling to the floor, he reached the window in a soundless rush.

Until then, he had had no clue to how long he had been unconscious after he had been knocked out in the mausoleum, and with his hands tied behind him he had been unable to see the time on his wrist watch. But now, with the electric bulb behind him, he saw that the sky was no longer black but gray with the first dim promise of dawn. And that faint glimmer of illumination was enough to show him why his captors were so unconcerned about leaving him in a room with an open unbarred window.

The *palazzo* was perched on the very edge of a precipice. The window from which he leaned out was pierced in a smooth wall with no other openings for fifteen feet on either side or above. Below, the wall merged without a break into the vertical cliff which served as its foundation. And below that juncture the rock sheered away into still unfathomable blackness.

NEXT MONTH —

THE SAINT CONTINUES HIS
WAR AGAINST THE UNGODLY AS
HE MEETS A YOUNG GOATHERD
WHO SAVES HIS LIFE —
A BARBER WHO
IS NOT INTERESTED IN MONEY —
AND AN EXTREMELY NAUGHTY GIRL
in the next thrill-packet instalment of
VENDETTA FOR THE SAINT

fifi and the Chilean truffle

by Orson Welles

There was once a truffle that almost started a world war.

Not "trifle" – *truffle.*

Tuber Melanosporum. The black things they put into goose livers. Pigs dig for them, but they almost never get to eat them. Any pig you're likely to find rooting about under an oak tree in the French Province of Perigord is bound to be heavily chaperoned by a keen-eyed farmer with a pocket full of corn. The pig gets the corn, and what the farmer gets for the truffle is a pretty penny (or "jolie sou").

That Shakespeare among chefs, Brillat-Savarin referred to the truffle as "the black diamond of the kitchen," and the little roots are priced accordingly.

In the autumn months optimistic porkers in Northern Italy turn up an outstandingly succulent "white" truffle – actually a

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Twenty-five years have passed since Orson Welles scared the peoples of these United States with his much too realistic production on the radio of Wells' WAR OF THE WORLDS. Welles, who is still remembered for this, for the films he directed such as CITIZEN KANE and THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS, and for his portrayal of Othello, has long been interested in this field (he was one of our Judges in the Unicorn Mystery Book Club days) and has, as this short-short shows, a deft and ironic touch when he tells of a crisis—and a death. ***H.S.S.***

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lovely clouded grey. These are grated into silky paper-thin flakes and heaped over the fluffy *rizottos* of Milan. But luckily these superb rarities are seasonal, and travel poorly — and thereby hangs my tale.

It happened in Paris and the tragic hero was a Minister in the French Cabinet.

The villain was a truffle.

This truffle was neither black nor white.

"It pretends," said Henri, the Minister's chef, "to be grey. But in point of fact it is the most abominable green."

The truffle was, moreover, enormous. It was the size of a cantaloup and it came from Chile, where the Minister's wife's father had once been *en poste*.

This lady's childhood memories of Chilean truffles were so glamorous that she had pulled strings, and the striking example now under her chef's suspicious eye had been flown all the way from Santiago to Paris in the diplomatic pouch.

His Excellency the Minister had at first mistaken it for some exotic meteorological specimen, while the First Under-Secretary, with a nice flair for melodrama, took the precaution of immersing the truffle in a tub of water under the impression that it was a bomb.

Madame, the Minister's wife, lost no time in setting everybody straight. As they well knew, an official dinner of the highest importance was to be given that very evening.

"It is July," she pointed out, "the white truffles of Italy are not to be found, and people eat black truffles every day."

This last, of course, was not strictly accurate, but her husband contented himself with hinting that perhaps his honoured guests, being dignitaries from the wilds of Soviet Russia, would not, during their brief stay in Paris, have already become sated to the point of boredom with French truffles.

"The truffle of Chile." said Madame with finality, "is a pleasing novelty. Inform the chef to use it with the sole." And with this she leaves our story, for the dinner was a stag affair.

"It would not be wise," said the Minister with typical understatement, "to disregard my wife's wishes. And besides, the Bolsheviks couldn't possibly know the difference."

But the chef, a man of vivid temperament, was not to be placated. "Think of the responsbility!" he cried, holding the mossy truffle at arm's length. "Sixteen high ranking dignitaries of the Soviet Union! Suppose they die?"

"Now, now, Henri — don't make a drama of it —"

"Drama?" — first placing the truffle gingerly on the floor,

Henri started waving his arms—"Drama? Let me assure Your Excellency that to involve such a vegetable growth in a fish sauce, and to feed it to a group of revolutionaries schooled to the most direct methods of political action—is not to make drama, but to encourage tragedy!"

"He is thinking," said the First Under-Secretary in a discreet undertone, "of reprisals."

"Well, now Henri, don't forget the Ministry's behind you."

"Your Excellency forgets to what I owe my first loyalty."

"Naturally, your professional pride—"

"Not at all, I refer to my position as a member of the Communist Party."

It had slipped the Minister's mind that his chef was a Communist. "That does make it awkward, doesn't it?"

"I am already suspected of deviationism," said Henri. "Imagine my fate if so much as one minor gastric upset—"

"Henri, my wife stands behind those truffles."

"She is a brave woman, Your Excellency."

"Now if one of you," said the Minister, "would care to act as a guinea-pig—"

There followed an uneasy silence only disturbed by the asthmatic snufflings of Fifi, an aged Peke.

"It boils down to this—" the Minister resumed, staring bleakly out of the window—"we have the choice of poisoning the entire Soviet delegation or defying the express wishes of my wife. Either contingency is unthinkable. Fifi! Come back with that!"

The Pekinese had seized upon the truffle, and was worrying it drearily across the parquet floor. The First Under-Secretary jumped forward as Fifi dug her teeth into the vegetable's greenish flesh; but suddenly he stopped—the dog was chewing with evident relish, a generous hunk of the Chilean delicacy, and a terrible look had come into the Minister's eye.

"Long ago," he said, speaking in tones he generally reserved for funerals of the highest pomp, "this elderly and ailing beast should have been put quietly away. Give it another piece of truffle. Should it survive till dinner we are safe to proceed with the menu as planned by my wife. But should Fifi perish—it will be in a good cause: the security of the Republic."

By dinner time everyone was breathing easier. Fifi was perhaps the only exception. Not that the truffle hadn't agreed with her; it had, but in the evening hours her asthma was always a bit troublesome. The Minister let her out to graze in the garden and turned back with a light heart to receive his guests.

A bare hour later the Comrade Vice Commisar of Soviet Fisheries was already on his feet proposing a toast to peace. Henri had turned the hated truffle into one of his most subtle triumphs, chopping it with shallots and mushrooms into a sauce of white wine thickened with butter and the yolks of eggs.

The Russians to a man had mopped their plates with bread and asked for more, and now over his second glass of an excellent champagne the Minister was congratulating himself on a diplomatic success when the First Under-Secretary slipped a pencilled note under his hand. The message was simple:

"FIFI IS DEAD."

The Minister mumbled his excuses and rushed into the kitchen.

"Call for an ambulance!" he cried, "If the Russians die here in the Ministry, it will bring down the Government!"

His hand froze on the telephone. One ambulance would scarcely be adequate; there were 16 in the delegation. The image of 16 ambulances, each bearing its Soviet diplomat, screaming and clanging out of the Quai d'Orsay, was quickly replaced wth a mental tableau of 16 distinguished corpses in 16 hearses surging endlessly down the Champs-Elyses in what would certainly be the most well-attended funeral in history. Every Communist in Europe would march in that procession; there would be a general strike, and then—

In the dining-hall another Comrade Commissar could be heard proposing another toast. "I give you—" he said. "the French Revolution."

"That—" thought the Minister, "is precisely what we're going to get." With 16 honoured guests of the Republic struck down at an official dinner in cold blood, revolution was only the beginning—this was war!

Dessert was just about to be served when a trustworthy doctor, under the strictest oath of secrecy, was smuggled into the Ministry and put to work with Henri in the kitchen. There are, it seems, only two effective antidotes for truffle poisoning, and it was felt that neither of them was sufficiently tasteless to risk introducing in the "Bomb Surprise." Obviously the antidotes would have to be surreptitiously administered and if world peace was to be preserved it could only be with the coffee.

"Turkish coffee," the First Under-Secretary urged. "Cafe Diable—laced with heavy spirits. Henri must arrange it."

The chef, mindful of his own responsibilities as a good Communist, laboured mightily.

"Try some tabasco." suggested

the Minister, "or a bit of curry powder."

"Your Excellency," said Henri, spitting out a spoonful of the brew, "at one period of the Occupation I was implicated in a *pate* of very young kittens; one has one's resources, but they are exhausted: the effluvia of the clinic persists. Send for the stomach-pumps and the priests—I know my limitations!" And here the good man burst into tears of despair.

At this black moment there enters the Third Under-Secretary. He knows nothing of the present diplomatic contretemps, for his rank is not such as to admit him to the banquet. "I have been speaking to Madame —says he, "on the phone. She was most upset over the news about Fifi—"

The Minister cuts him off with an impatient gesture. "We are *all* upset," he says, "indeed, we've felt the loss most keenly."

"Madame asks me to request that we fire the assistant gardener."

"This is hardly the moment for domestic trivialities. My God, man—we're on the brink of—"

'But the gardener left the gate open, and you know how Fifi always *would* run after cars—"

The Minister seizes the Third Under-Secretary by the lapel of his coat, a lapel which will shortly be brightened with the rosette of the Legion of Honour. "You mean—?"

"Yes, the poor old thing tried it just once too often. A big delivery truck. Death was instantaneous. It was very sad."

THE SAINT CLUB

Since our recent report on this august institution, we have been inundated with inquiries from readers who are interested in attaching themselves to such a distinguished body.
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THE SAINT CLUB
East Arbour Street
London, E.1, England

For the moment, we can only offer affiliation with the English club, with all its horrors and disadvantages; but we should be most interested to hear from any American or Overseas *aficionados* who might think organizing their own national branches.

L.C.

the humming bird

by William Irish

This story must be told in terms of two dimensions — hearing and touch. For sight has no part in it. It is the story of "Ma" Adams and her son Ben, and how he went straight. And Ma Adams was blind . . .

There were three of them in the front room of the big country house, one night about dusk. Ma Adams and Mary, who was her companion, and a man's voice coming in over the radio from a big city several hundred miles away.

Ma Adams sat in her rocking chair, stroking a tortoise-shell cat on her lap. You could not tell she was blind by looking at her. The pupils of her eyes were not destroyed. Only a certain fixedness about them gave her away.

In every other possible way life seemed to have done its best to atone to her for its cruelty. She did not look the fifty-six years that were her age. Her face, under its halo of silvery hair, was that of a woman of thirty. Her back was as straight

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William Irish, author of the classic SOMEBODY ON THE PHONE (1951), DEAD MAN BLUES (1948), I WOULDN'T BE IN YOUR SHOES (1943), etc. etc., has unquestionably contributed more than most to the stature of this field. His stories, such as WILD BILL HICCUP in our Nov. 1963 issue and now this, deal with people (not VIP's . . .), their problems and their dreams.

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as a youngster's. As long as she remained indoors, she found her way about unaided with astonishing dexterity. Pieces of furniture, must not be moved out of their accustomed places. Mary saw to that.

Mary was seventeen. She was one of those rare human beings without a selfish impulse in her make-up. Companioning Ma Adams wasn't duty to her; it was love. This was a kind of Eden, this out-of-the-way old country house.

And as though to show how different that other world outside was from the happiness and peace of this one, there was the voice of this man coming in, tuned very low, giving a dramatized news-flash of the day's events.

"It's noon, and the streets outside the Farmers' Bank are filled with the lunch-hour crowd. There are two armed guards on duty in the lobby. A young man steps jauntily in from the street. He's humming as he crosses the marble floor, apparently without a care in the world. He goes to one of the writing slabs along the wall and fills out a deposit slip — well, maybe we'd better call it a withdrawal slip — and he keeps on humming.

"Teller J. P. Smith has just come back from his own lunch, and as he reenters his cage he hears that muffled tune stop in front of his wicket. He reaches for the slip that is handed in to him and scans it. There are just three words on it, short and to the point: *All you've got.* And there's a gun peering at him through the bars. And the man behind it is still humming!

"Then something happens. The guards' suspicions are aroused. As they move forward to investigate, they're shot down from behind. Two accomplices have been standing in the doorway, unnoticed. Then the teller is shot down, too, in cold blood, without any excuse. And the last thing the cowed employees of the bank hear, as the murderer backs warily out with his loot to a car at the curb, is that same monotonous tune coming from his lips!

"The Humming Bird, ladies and gentlemen! The cold-blooded, wanton killer who sings at his work. The dying teller told them later, when he regained consciousness for a short while, what the tune was. He recognized it — *St. Louis Blues.* The next time you hear it, remember —"

"Mary!" Ma Adams said, with what for her was unusual sharpness. "That's the third time I asked you to shut that off. That's not fit stuff for a child your age to hear!"

A click, and there was silence in the room. Slowly the effect

of the words wore off, like an evil exhalation finding its way out of the house.

After a while the girl said: "Capitol City. That's where Ben was the last time you heard from him, wasn't it?"

Ma Adams could tell she'd glanced up at the picture on the wall. She'd never seen it herself, but she knew it was there. She dusted it off every day with a special little silk handkerchief, not used for anything else.

"That was nearly two years ago," she said quietly. "I suppose he's moved on somewhere else by now." She sighed a little. Five years was a long time to be alone in the dark. Mary's hand came to rest on her shoulder, pressed down hard.

"That's all right, child," Ma Adams said gratefully. "He wanted to go somewhere, be somebody. I know he has, too. He'll be coming back —"

Outside on the highway, in the night silence, the hum of a machine in high gear was coming nearer. Few cars came by this way. They sat listening, waiting for it to reach a crescendo and race on by. It reached a crescendo, then stopped dead with a sudden jamming of brakes.

There was a quick step on the porch, then a pounding fist at the front door. Again and again it struck. The whole house seemed to shake with the force of the knocking.

Mary's chair creaked as she jumped up. Ma Adams stayed there, listening, "watching" with her ears. Walls didn't impede her "sight" — she could be in one room and "see" what went on in another, if it was close enough.

Mary's footsteps went hurrying down the hall. A click sounded as she pushed the wall switch that controlled the porch light. The door opened and a voice growled: "Put that out. What's the matter with you?"

The click sounded a second time. Then footsteps heavier than Mary's came toward the room —

But Ma Adams was on her feet already, arms stretched quiveringly out before her into the dark. The dispossessed cat hit the floor with a soft thud.

"Ben!" It was just a whispered breath that she uttered.

"Who's here with you?" the man asked. His voice swung around her, so she knew his head had swung with it, as he took in the room.

"Just the two of us, Ben. Mary came a week after you left—"

But he'd gone back to the door again. "Get him in here. Hurry up!" His voice was directed out into the open. Other footsteps staggered up onto the porch, as

though bearing a burden.

"Upstairs!" Ben said curtly, and then, to the girl: "That woodshed still standing around in back?"

"Yes," she answered in a frightened voice.

"Hop in with me and show me the way," he commanded. "Gotta get the car in off the road!"

The heavily weighted footsteps, meanwhile, went toiling up to the floor above. A feeble groan sounded. A voice answered it fiercely: "Shut up, you jinx, or I'll conk you!"

The throbbing of the motor started up again, at the same place where it had stopped. It traveled around the side of the house, faded away across the fields toward the back.

Ma Adams crossed the room to the wall. Her ten fingertips found the cool, smooth glass of the picture. She held them like that, up against it, in a sort of prayer of thanksgiving.

She had turned, and was waiting for his delayed greeting, when he and Mary came in through the back. He gave it to her, a rough, careless stroke of his hand across her silvery hair. "H'ya old lady?" Strange, curt greeting from that strange outer world that had swallowed him five years before! Such a casual greeting, and after so long a time! Before he had left —

A chair creaked under him. A match hissed. The unaccustomed fragrance of tobacco smoke drifted toward her. But there was some kind of tension coming from Mary. She could feel it.

"What's the matter, child?" she asked.

"I — I've got blood on the hem of my dress!" the girl gasped.

"That's from the seat of the car," Ben said easily. "We had a little accident, busted the windows. One of the guys with me got hurt a little."

"Maybe we'd better send for Doctor Chase —" Ma Adams began anxiously.

His voice changed abruptly, cutting her like a whip across the face. "No Doctor Chase and nobody else, get me? We'll take care of him ourselves. We're funny that way."

She edged timidly nearer. "Let me see if you've — you've changed any, Ben," she pleaded.

Her fingertips were her eyes. She reached out, exploring his face with ten feather-light fingers, trembling with emotion. Familiarity came first, familiarity of the contour, the bone structure. Then, dismayingly, strangeness crept in along with it. A smooth, strange coolness, like paraffin, like a wax false face superimposed on his own.

"It's not you at all!" The wounded cry of distress was wrung from her by that strange-

ness. "Something's happened to you, Ben!"

He struck her hands down impatiently. "I got scarred in a fight, hadda have it fixed up a little —"

A voice called down from above, "Get some hot water up here, quick!"

"I'll take it up," Mary said.

"I'll take it up myself," he growled. "You stay here where you are."

After he'd gone, swearing softly to himself, Mary remarked: "That must have been a bad accident they had. The car's got little holes all over it, and all the glass is broken."

Ma Adams did not answer. She just sat staring into the dark, holding her hands to her face. It wasn't him at all. It wasn't the Ben she had sent out into the world so bravely that day years ago! Something had happened to that Ben! Something horrible.

Someone started screaming upstairs, and a door was slammed shut. She could still hear the screams, but after a while they stopped. Then she heard Ben and someone else coming down again. Their voices on the stairs were two husky murmurs that only ears like hers could have detected.

"Looks infected to me."

"If he's gonna croak, why don't he get it over with, instead of holding us up like this!"

They came into the room. Ben said, "This is Bill Johnson, a business partner of mine". A strangled sound, like a suppressed chuckle, came from the other man.

They sat down at the table. Mary's footsteps hurried in and out, bringing the food. But that same impression of tension kept coming from her to Ma's sharp senses. A dish crashed suddenly as it fell out of her hands.

"Quit looking at her!" Ben growled. "What's the matter with you?"

Ma Adams bent her head a little, guiding her food to her mouth. It should have been wonderful, this reunion, after five years, and instead it was all so strange, so — so furtive.

Afterward the groaning started in again from that room above, and one of them went up, though she wasn't sure which of the two it was. There was so much unaccustomed movement around her tonight that, for the first time, her faculties failed her a little, and she couldn't quite keep track of who was about her. She groped for her rocker, sat down in it. The radio was on again, purring softly:

I hate to see
That evenin' sun go down —

"That's right, dear," Ma Ad-

ams said, when Mary had come in from the kitchen and the sound had ebbed away. "Turn it off. We don't want to hear any more —"

"I didn't," the girl said. "It wasn't. That was Ben humming. He just went out of the room."

Ma Adam's head slowly dropped down over her chest, as though she were very sleepy. She was wide-awake, though. But the lids were down over her eyes.

The groans upstairs suddenly sharpened to a scream, then stopped. Footsteps ran back and forth — she could hear them through the ceiling. Both men were up there.

The girl was suddenly crouched down beside her, shivering. "I'm so frightened," she whimpered.

Ma Adams stroked her hair. It was rumpled and awry. She ran a soothing hand down Mary's face. The silky texture of her skin was gritty. The girl sensed the unasked question.

"I sooted up my face with coal dust," she said. "I mussed up my hair. He — he keeps looking at me so, that friend of Ben's!"

It did not seem at all strange to the two of them that the young girl should come to the blind old lady for protection.

The groaning had stopped upstairs. Ben's steps came running down abruptly, went past them into the kitchen. He moved around in there a little, came out again.

"Looking for something, Ben?" Ma Adams asked.

"Yeah," he said, "I'm looking for a shovel."

There was sudden, nameless horror in the room. That silence upstairs — Ma Adam's arm flashed out around the girl's shoulders.

A harsh, scratchy sound that was her voice forced its way up through her throat after a moent.

"There's one outside, by the back door," she heard herself say.

He closed the room door leading to the stairs. "You two stay in here," he ordered. Then he went out the other way, to the back. They heard him pick up the shovel from against the side of the house, carry it off into the dark with him. His voice trailed off in the deathly stillness .

Feelin' tomorrow
Like I feel today—

There was an abrupt movement of the girl's head, as she turned her face, to hid it against Ma Adams's shoulder.

Little sounds were all that remained. The creak of Ma Adams's rocker. The tick of the clock on the shelf. The distant

bite of a shovel into the earth, out in the open field behind the house somewhere . . .

Ben was still humming when he came back twenty minutes later. He did not pass through the room they were in, but went directly up the stairs from the back door.

A bed creaked up above. Then heavy, slower footsteps, two sets of them, started down. They were separated by about a six-foot distance as they passed outside the closed door of the living room. Ma Adams's ears could tell her things like that. Her ears could also make out the slight rustle of a sheet or something trailing along the floor. And like a dirge, very low, someone was humming:

I'll pack my trunk,
Make my getaway—

Ma Adams did something she had possibly never done in all her unseeing years before. She pressed the palms of her hands tightly against her ears, and shut them off from the outside world, sealing out sounds that had no right to exist at all.

She removed them about the time the two men were coming back again, Ben and his friend, Bill Johnson. They were both laughing out there in the open, as they came toward the house. She didn't know how long it had been. The girl, Mary, had not moved, but was still cowering there by her side. Ma Adams could feel the beat of the girl's heart. She urged her to her feet with an upward pressure of the wrists.

"You go up to your room," she breathed. "Go to bed now. That's a good girl. Lock your door on the inside. Don't be frightened; I'll be down here. I'll —"

The shovel clanged against the boards of the house as it was thrown down. Bill Johnson's voice said, "It's more than he would 'a' done for me."

They came into the kitchen, and tap water rumbled into the sink. "Looka that! Blisters all over me mitts!"

Ben laughed. "Can't take it, huh?"

Ma Adams stretched out a detaining hand toward the hall door, where the girl stood poised for flight. Her voice was almost casual:

"Child, you know more about those things than I, you listen so much to that radio set. How does this *St. Louis Blues* piece go?"

The girl's voice was stifled. "Something about hating to see that evening sun go down!" A frightened sob broke from her. Her footsteps went running lightly up the stairs. A moment later

the door of her room slapped shut.

Ma Adams sat there in her rocker, while the men finished washing their hands in the kitchen, rocking slowly, like an automaton. She'd had very little, until now. A son, somewhere, whom she'd been proud of. A son she'd known was going to be a fine, successful, upright man. That had made the darkness easier to bear.

Now she had nothing, nothing at all. That son she'd been proud of was gone. Now the darkness was Stygian, without hope, without consolation.

After a long while a voice penetrated through her misery—how long after she did not know, nor care.

"Where'd the wren go?" It was Bill Johnson's voice.

"Upstairs, to bed," a voice that was hers answered.

"Lay off!" Ben said sharply.

There was an odor of liquor in the room around her. Their voices were a little blurred. Not much, but a little. The cat yowled abruptly, and Johnson's voice said angrily, "Get away from me, Fleas!" as though he had just kicked it.

Ben said pointedly, "You always stay up this late, old-timer?"

She got up without answering and felt her way toward the door.

"No hard feelings," he said. "We've just got a little business we wanta talk over, that's all." And then, as she traced her way expertly along the hall wall toward the stairs, he called after her: "Can you make it?"

They were evidently watching her from the doorway. "Great stuff!" she heard Johnson say, surprised into admiration.

She went all the way up, nearly to the top of the stairs, then froze there. To her, it was like being in the same room with them. A bottle clinked against a glass.

"Now that we're rid of him," Johnson said, "what're we hanging around for? Let's get out of this God-forsaken dump! We can make it. Hijack somebody and switch cars, take the first boat we see that looks good. When do we blow?"

"Let's kill two birds with one stone." That was Ben's voice. "There's a pushover they call a bank in the hick town near here. The money they handle is just as good as anyone else's, though. Whaddya say we stop by there in the morning on our way out? All the hayseeds for miles around come in and sock their dough away."

"Ain't we hot enough now?

"That's just it! They won't be expecting us to show for another six months. It'll be a whole lot easier right now than later. 'Get

it while the getting's good' is my motto! Then we can really pull down the shades, and keep 'em that way until the heat goes off!"

"O.K., it's a deal," Johnson said. "But it's the last job I pull with you until you get them tonsils of yours taken out! You and that tune you're always humming!"

She heard Ben laugh. "I don't even know I'm doin' it any more. It's like second nature."

They came out into the lower hall, and she crept noiselessly across the upper one, into her room, stood there pressed against the door.

She heard them coming up. "Where do I flop?" Johnson asked.

Ben growled, "What do I care where you flop?"

"I ain't going in there where we had him! Whaddya think I am?"

She tensed as the knob of Mary's door rattled ineffectually in someone's grasp. Then Ben's voice sounded roughly: "C'mon, lay off! There's an empty one down at the end."

Their two doors closed, one after the other. She could still hear them both moving around, even after that, for a little while. Shoes clopped down. A click in the room next to hers, as the light went off. Then another click, minutes later, down at the end of the hall. Then silence.

She stayed there, quiet, listening, while seconds ticked into minutes and minutes into a half-hour. She didn't know, at first, what she was going to do. What was there she could do?"

Even after she had eased her door open and crept back into the hall, she didn't know. There was a small thing, a rite, calling her downstairs. When she got there, she felt for the picture on the wall, unstrung it, took it down. Noiselessly she opened the grate in the kitchen stove, thrust it in, glass and all, where the hot ashes lingered, and replaced the lid.

She had had a son. That was all over with now. There were two enemies in the house with her. Two enemies who, between them, had shattered the beacon lighting her eternal darkness, had destroyed the only happiness she'd had.

This man who'd come here tonight wasn't her son. Even his face had been changed, molded with paraffin. And now he and his friend were going out tomorrow to rob her fellow townspeople, some of them her lifelong friends; to shoot them down in cold blood as they had already shot others.

She couldn't bring back to life those they had already kill-

ed. She couldn't undo the ghastly evil they had committed in the great cities hundreds of miles away from here. But she could prevent their doing it any more. She could put a stop to it from now on. And thus it came to her slowly what it was she must do.

She went outside through the kitchen door. Slowly she groped her way around the house, one hand out against its boards to guide her. The heavy shutters of every lower-floor window she drew together, latched on the outside. Then she went in again. The kitchen door was half-glass, but she locked the outer storm door over it securely, drew the key out, threw it in the stove.

Then she went back to the upper hall again, soundlessly, step by cautious step. It was easy for her to move quietly. The darkness was no obstacle, for she was always in darkness. Their heavy breathing, in their respective rooms, was so audible out here.

Wraithlike, a shadow without substance for all the sound she made, she went down the hall. She went to Johnson's room first, found the knob with the silent tips of her fingers, turned it, opened just wide enough to admit her.

She knew where the bed was in here, but she must be careful, for he might have moved the rocker out of place. She dropped to her hands and knees and crawled across the floor in a straight, unwavering line toward the bed. He *had* moved the chair out of line, and she would have tripped and fallen over it had she been upright. Her padding hand came to rest on one of its curved bases when she least expected it. She gripped it, held it motionless.

Kneeling there beside it, her hands went over the tumbled clothes he had tossed onto it. She didn't know much about those thing—those weapons that shot people down. But she knew they must have them somewhere, even when they slept.

It wasn't with the clothes on the chair. Maybe he kept it on his body, even in bed at night. Maybe under the pillow . . .

The thought of turning back never even occurred to her. She had set out to do something, and there is no patience so terrible as that of the helpless.

It wasn't on him anywhere. He turned restlessly in his liquor-ridden sleep under the insect-lightness of her fumbling hands. She crouched there below the bed, waiting for him to settle back into heavy slumber again.

She had never known the human hand could be made so flat, so spadelike, as when hers prodded here and there, under the

mattress he lay on, under the very pillow his head rested on. Nothing. Despair then settled on her briefly. She must have these implements of death. Not for her own safety—that didn't count with her—but because they were the only arguments these two men understood, respected, could be made to obey.

And then, as she rose to move back a little, something heavy brushed her shoulder. Something hanging from the head of the bed—there within her reach the whole time.

She felt a leather holster, weighted down, fumbled with it, drew out what it contained, hid it in the folds of her apron. Back at the door again, clutching it tightly to her with one hand, she changed the key over to the outside, turned it, drew it out.

She hid the trophy in her own room, in a place they'd never find, even with their unimpaired eyes, then went into Ben's room. This time it was easier, for she knew where to look for the gun. He never even stirred, but it took time, lots of time. She took the key out of his door, too, after she'd locked it. Then she went across the hall and pecked with her nails at the girl's door.

There was a quick movement, a whispered "Who's there?" Mary had been awake. Ma Adams had known she would be. She put her lips close to the keyhole. "Open. Open, dear," she breathed hurriedly.

The door moved back, and she heard Mary's frightened breathing.

"Get on your things. Come downstairs. I'll be waiting at the front door. Sh, don't make a sound now!"

The girl knew enough not to use the lights. Ma Adams still had the second gun hidden in her apron, as she stood by the front door, when Mary groped her way down the unlighted stairs toward her. Ma Adams reached out, thrust a copper penny into the girl's hand.

"Remember what the electrician explained, that time we had the trouble with the lights? Dear, would you be afraid to drop this behind the master switch in the fuse box? Light a match. Don't hold it in your hand; just drop it and close the switch on it. Careful, child, that you don't burn yourself."

The girl didn't ask her why she wanted it done. There was a low *phut* from the kitchen, as the fuses blew out under the short circuit the penny made, and she heard Mary jump hurriedly back. The odds would be more even now between Ma Adams and her enemies. At least, until dawn came.

When the girl had slipped back to where she waited, Ma

Adams gripped her by the shoulder. "Can you drive that car they put in the woodshed?"

"I – I think so."

"Then drive it into town and come back with help. Get the State police."

"And you –"

Ma Adams unwrapped the gun. A sudden intake of breath told her the girl had seen what it was, even in the dark.

"I'll stay here," she said. "Otherwise they'll just go out and kill more people. I don't want them to do that. I'll keep them here."

"But Ben's – your son," the girl faltered.

Ma Adams didn't answer for a moment. Finally she said: "I want him to go straight. That's all I have left now. You have to pay for the things you do. There isn't any other way."

She pushed the girl gently but firmly through the open door. "Hurry, dear. I'll wait here by the door. The windows and the back door are locked, and all the shutters are closed. There isn't any other way for them to get out. I'm not afraid. But hurry. Don't take too long."

The girl's running steps died out around the side of the house. Ma Adams locked the heavy outer door, took the key out, thrust it into the top of her shoe. Then she stood there, waiting with her back to the door, awkwardly holding the unaccustomed gun with both hands.

The muffled whine of the car sounded, slowly rounding the house to get back on the highway. The girl was driving it carefully, to make as little noise as possible. Ma Adams could tell when it had reached the level macadam, for there was less jogging.

Then suddenly, sickeningly, it backfired. A shattering report tore the quiet night to pieces. Instantly after, the machine sped off, straight and true, toward town. The sound of it died down in the distance.

But already the first preliminary knob-wrenchings from the doors upstairs had changed to a violent battering of feet and fists against the panels. Ma Adams stood motionless where she was, her head lowered as if she was looking at the floor.

Johnson's voice came down to her clearly.

"Hummer! Where are you? I'm locked in here, and my rod's been lifted!"

Ben's voice came back. "Me too! Hit it with a chair. They've lammed out with the car. We gotta get outa here!"

She heard the terrific crash of a chair lifted bodily against one of the panels. The chair shattered and there was a sound of sticks falling all over the floor. Good old house, with its strong,

solid doors, thought Ma Adams.

Mary couldn't get to town and back under three-quarters of an hour. Before she could get some men together it would be well over an hour. It didn't matter much. He was going to go straight, this enemy who had changed places with her son; he was going to go straight. That was the only way she could get her son back again.

The din upstairs increased. They were like a couple of caged bears on a rampage. She heard the footsteps of one retreat to the far end of the room, then come lunging at the door. The impact seemed to shake the whole house. He did it a second time, and a third. Then suddenly there was a sound like a giant firecracker, and she heard a section of the door slap back against the wall outside. He'd got out!

She took a deep breath, straightened; the back of her shoulders found the door behind her, pressed flat against it. She didn't know which of the two men it was. There was a momentary lull, after the terrible din that had been going on. Stealthy footsteps moved about up there. She tensed, waiting. But they didn't come down. They went into one of the other rooms, came out again. Two shots went off in rapid succession, with a sound of metal flying apart. The second door flung open, with a curse.

"That did it," one of them said in a low, hoarse voice. "They overlooked Shorty's rod, in the other room! C'mon, I'm taking a powder outa this place, before we have the whole works down on our necks!"

Their voices mingled; they snarled words to each other that Ma Adams could not catch. Suddenly, fear and anger had made their voices strangely similar — both low, hoarse, animal-like. She could not even be certain now which was which.

Footsteps, one set of them, came to the head of the stairs, started down, close to the wall, with an awkward hesitancy Ma Adams' own never had. Whoever was descending couldn't see his way. The blind stalking the blind! She was holding the gun out straight toward the sound, one finger around the trigger, supporting the heavy barrel on the palm of her other hand.

There came a tiny click, not as loud as a light switch would make; it was the sound of a flashlight turned on, directed toward her. The momentary hitch in the oncoming tread told her she had been seen by the prowler.

Ma Adams stiffened.

"Is that you, son?" she said calmly. "Don't come any near-

er or I'll shoot."

The steps started again, very slowly, very heavily, as if someone was fixing his gaze so intently on her he had forgotten to walk softly.

"Drop that gun, old lady!" The words were a mere thread of whispered snarl. "Or I'll plug you!" Which of them had spoken she could not tell. But she did not lower the gun she held.

"Don't!" the other voice rasped flatly. "You can't shoot her! She's blind and she's my —"

There was a sound of footsteps, as of someone leaping forward. Another sound, as something hard struck momentarily against a banister. Then a gun went off for the third time in that house that night.

There was a thud from the plaster ceiling over the stairs. Something came clattering, skittering down from above, landing nearly at her feet. She found it with the toe of her shoe, kick it off to one side. Flat and heavy, it was, and made of metal.

The staircase was creaking, whining, with two heavy bodies struggling on it. And now Ma Adams was trembling all over, as she stood there with her back pressed against the locked door. Her son was fighting for her! Risking his life for her. He was her son once more, the son she had lost, and she was proud of him again. The one light in her darkness was flickering back to life.

There was a wild yelp, of fright, of terror and pain, and something tumbled heavily down the long stairway. Rolling, falling, all the way to the bottom, to lie there still, without sound. A heavy breath or two, and then even that had stopped.

After a long, stunned interval, shaky footsteps started down toward her once more from above. She let them come on, past the halfway mark, all the way to the bottom, past the obstacle that lay there at the foot of the stairs. She held the gun poised rigidly at the sound. She didn't ask who it was. She didn't need to.

A low hum came toward her, a mere thread of sound.

Got a heart like a rock cast
in the sea —

A hand came to rest on the muzzle of the gun, slowly shifted it aside.

"Mother," a whispered breath in her ear said, so faintly that only she could have heard the words, "let me out. I've got to go. But I'm going — straight."

Her fingers fumbled at the key. Someone brushed past her, then the door closed, and she was alone once more. But now she had her happiness back, her pride — the lamp that had lit

her lonely darkness for so long, and would light it now again.

They came more quickly than she'd expected, the men Mary had brought. Cars braked to a stop outside, excited voices, hurried footsteps on the porch.

She was standing there with her back to the door. It was unlocked now. Their opening of it brushed her lightly aside. She was still holding the gun, but it was pointed downward at the floor now. She could tell they were bending over what lay there in the hall before her.

"One of them got away, eh?" somebody said to her. "Which way did he go?"

Another voice said, "She can't tell you; she's —"

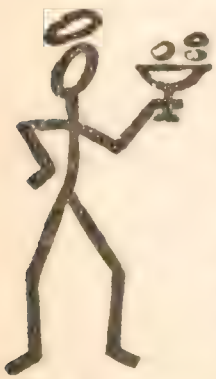
"Yes," Ma Adams said, "I can tell you which way he went. He went straight."

She stood aside, to let them carry the dead man out of the house. She didn't attempt to touch his face as he went by. What was he to her? A stranger, an enemy? She had no interest in him. So they carried him out and through the glare of the headlights of the car that stood there.

"He's gone straight," she whispered gladly to herself, and did not hear the sudden gasp from Mary, in the yard, as the light fell on the dead man's face.

But she was right, for it was Ben, and he *had* gone straight at last . . .

THE CHAMPAGNE MYSTERY



The other afternoon, at the invitation of an old friend, Andrew Persad of M. Henri Wines, we attended a Champagne Taste sponsored by the Sommelier Society of America, of which Andrew is a member. It was an interesting experience because, more so than at a wine taste, so many of those present obviously approached the task of judging the champagnes that were being introduced with all the solemnity and air of dedication one used to find at the Whitney in the old days . . . Others of us, not self-admitted connoisseurs, were simply pleased by champagnes such as Monsieur Henri's pleasant *Pierre Cartier* Champagne, R U Delapenha's Champagne de Castellane, and Munson Shaw's impressive *Laurent-Perrier Cuvee Grand Siecle* 1955, the champagne served—and one could understand why—at a State Dinner in the Gallery of Mirrors at Versailles this Fall.

thou art the man

by Edgar Allan Poe

I will now play the Epidus to the Rattleborough enigma. I will expound to you as I alone can — the secret of the enginery that effected the Rattleborough miracle—the one, the true, the admitted, the undisputed, the indisputable miracle which put a definite end to infidelity among the Rattleburghers, and converted to the orthodoxy of the grandames all the carnal-minded who had ventured to be sceptical before.

This event—which I should be sorry to discuss in a tone of unsuitable levity — occurred in the summer of 18—. Mr. Barnabas Shuttleworthy, one of the wealthiest and most respectable citizens of the borough, had been missing for several days under circumstances which gave rise to suspicion of foul play. Mr. Shuttleworthy had set out from Rattleborough very early one Saturday morning, on horseback, with the avowed intention of proceeding to the

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The night Edgar Allan Poe died, October 7, 1849, in Baltimore, those listening to the cries of the dying man knew only that a writer, an unhappy man who had been ill for years, was at long last to have the peace that he had been denied in life. Nobody, then, would have believed that, more than a hundred years later, the author of THE MURDERS OF THE RUE MORGUE, THE PURLOINED LETTER, THE RAVEN, THE GOLD BUG, THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM, etc., would be remembered wherever books are known . . .

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city of —, about fifteen miles distant, and of returning the night of the same day. Two hours after his departure, however, his horse returned without him, and without the saddle-bags which had been strapped on his back at starting. The animal was wounded, too, and covered with mud. These circumstances naturally gave rise to much alarm among the friends of the missing man, and when it was found, on Sunday morning, that he had not yet made his appearance, the whole borough arose *en masse* to go and look for his body.

The foremost and most energetic in instituting this search was the bosom friend of Mr. Shuttleworthy—a Mr. Charles Goodfellow, or, as he was universally called, "Charley Goodfellow," or "Old Charley Goodfellow." Now, whether it is a marvellous coincidence, or whether it is that the name itself has an imperceptible effect upon the character, I have never yet been able to ascertain; but the fact is unquestionable, that there never yet was any person named Charles who was not an open, manly, honest, good-natured and frankhearted fellow, with a rich, clear voice, that did you good to hear it, and an eye that looked you always straight in the face, as much as to say "I have a clear conscience myself; am afraid of no man, and am altogether above doing a mean action." And thus all the hearty, careless, "walking gentlemen" of the stage are very certain to be called Charles.

Now "Old Charley Goodfellow," although he had been in Rattleborough not longer than six months or thereabouts, and although nobody knew any thing about him before he came to settle in the neighbourhood, had experienced no difficulty in the world in making the acquaintance of all the respectable people in the borough. Not a man of them but would have taken his bare word for a thousand at any moment; and as for the women, there is no saying what they would not have done to oblige him. And all this came of his having been christened Charles, and of his possessing, in consequence, that ingenous face which is proverbially the very "best letter of recommendation."

I have already said that Mr. Shuttleworthy was one of the most respectable, and, undoubtedly, he was the most wealthy man in Rattleborough, while "Old Charley Goodfellow" was upon as intimate terms with him as if he had been his own brother. The two old gentlemen were next-door neighbours, and although Mr. Shuttleworthy seldom, if ever, visited "Old Char-

ley," and never was known to take a meal in his house, still this did not prevent the two friends from being exceedingly intimate, as I have just observed; for "Old Charley" never let a day pass without stepping in three or four times to see how his neighbour came on, and very often he would stay to breakfast or tea, and almost always to dinner; and then the amount of wine that was made way with by the two cronies at a sitting, it would really be a difficult thing to ascertain. Old Charley's favourite beverage was *Chateau Margaux,* and it appeared to do Mr. Shuttleworthy's heart good to see the old fellow swallow it, as he did, quart after quart; so that, one day, when the wine was *in* and the wit, as a natural consequence, somewhat *out,* he said to his crony, as he slapped him upon the back — "I tell you what it is, Old Charley, you are, by all odds, the heartiest old fellow I ever came across in all my born days; and, since you love to guzzle the wine at that fashion, I'll be darned if I don't have to make thee a present of a big box of the Chateau Margaux. Od rot me," — (Mr. Shuttleworthy had a sad habit of swearing, although he seldom went beyond "Od rot me," or "By gosh," or "By the jolly golly,") — "Od rot me," says he, "if I don't send an order to town this very afternoon for a double box of the best that can be got, and I'll make ye a present of it, I will— ye needn't say a word, now — I *will,* I tell ye, and there's an end of it; so look out for it — it will come to hand some of these fine days, precisely when ye are looking for it in the least." I mention this little bit of liberality on the part of Mr. Shuttleworthy, just by way of showing you how *very* intimate an understanding existed between the two friends.

Well, on the Sunday morning in question, when it came to be fairly understood that Mr. Shuttleworthy had met with foul play, I never saw any one so profoundly affected as "Old Charley Goodfellow." When he first heard that the horse had come home without his master, and without his master's saddle-bags, and all bloody from a pistol shot that had gone clean through and through the poor animal's chest without quite killing him; when he heard all this, he turned as pale as if the missing man had been his own dear brother or father, and shivered and shook all over as if he had had a fit of the ague.

At first, he was too much overpowered with grief to be able to do any thing at all, or to concert upon any plan of action; so that for a long time he en-

deavoured to dissuade Mr. Shuttleworthy's other friends from making a stir about the matter, thinking it best to wait awhile—say for a week or two, or a month or two, to see if something wouldn't turn up, or if Mr. Shuttleworthy wouldn't come in the natural way, and explain his reasons for sending his horse on before. I dare say you have often observed this disposition to temporize or to procrastinate in people who are labouring under any very poignant sorrow. Their powers of mind seem to be rendered torpid, so that they have a horror of any thing like action, and like nothing in the world so well as to lie quietly in bed and "nurse their grief," as the old ladies express it — that is to say, ruminate over their trouble.

The people of Rattleborough had, indeed, so high an opinion of the wisdom and discretion of "Old Charley," that the greater part of them felt disposed to agree with him, and not make a stir in the business "until something should turn up," as the honest old gentleman worded it; and I believe that, after all, this would have been the general determination but for the very suspicious interference of Mr. Shuttleworthy's nephew, a young man of very dissipated habits and otherwise of rather bad character. This nephew, whose name was Pennifeather, would listen to nothing like reason in the matter of "lying quiet," but insisted upon making immediate search for the "corpse of the murdered man." This was the expression he employed; and Mr. Goodfellow acutely remarked at the time, that it was "a *singular* expression, to say no more." This remark of Old Charley's, too, had great effect upon the crowd; and one of the party was heard to ask, very impressively, "how it happened that young Mr. Pennifeather was so intimately cognizant of all the circumstances connected with his wealthy uncle's disappearance, as to feel authorized to assert, distinctly and unequivocally, that his uncle *was* 'a murdered man.'" Hereupon some little squibbing and bickering occurred among various members of the crowd, and especially between "Old Charley" and Mr. Pennifeather — although this latter occurrence was, indeed, by no means a novelty, for no good will had subsisted between the parties for the last three or four months; and matters had even gone so far that Mr. Pennifeather had actually knocked down his uncle's friend for some alleged excess of liberty that the latter had taken in the uncle's house, of which the nephew was an inmate. Upon this occasion, "Old Charley" is said to have behaved

with exemplary moderation and Christian charity. He arose from the blow, adjusted his clothes, and made no attempt at retaliation at all—merely muttering a few words about "taking summary vengeance at the first convenient opportunity,"—a natural and very justifiable ebullition of anger, which meant nothing, however, and, beyond doubt, was no sooner given vent to than forgotten.

However these matters may be, (which have no reference to the point now at issue,) it is quite certain that the peop'e of Rattleborough, principally through the persuasion of Mr. Pennifeather, came at length to the determination of dispersing over the adjacent country in search of the missing Mr. Shuttleworthy. I say they came to this determination in the first instance. After it had been fully resolved that a search should be made, it was considered almost a matter of course that the seekers should disperse—that is to say, distribute themselves in parties—for the more thorough examination of the region round about. I forget, however, by what ingenious train of reasoning it was that "Old Charley" finally convinced the assembly that this was the most injudicious plan that could be pursued. Convince them, however, he did—all except Mr. Pennifeather; and, in the end, it was arranged that a search should be instituted carefully and very thoroughly by the burghers *en masse*, "Old Charley" himself leading the way.

As for the matter of that, there could have been no better pioneer than "Old Charley," whom every body knew to have the eye of a lynx; but, although he led them into all manner of out-of-the-way holes and corners, by routes that nobody had ever suspected of existing in the neighbourhood, and although the search was incessantly kept up day and night for nearly a week, still no trace of Mr. Shuttleworthy could be discovered. When I say no trace, however, I must not be understood to speak literally; for trace, to some extent, there certainly was. The poor gentleman had been tracked, by his horse's shoes, (which were peculiar,) to a spot about three miles to the east of the borough, in the main road leading to the city. Here the track made off into a by-path through a piece of woodland—this path coming out again into the main road and cutting off about half a mile of the regular distance. Following the shoe-marks down this lane, the party came at length to a pool of stagnant water, half hidden by the brambles, to the right of the lane, and opposite this pool all vestige of

the track was lost sight of. It appeared, however, that a struggle of some nature had here taken place, and it seemed as if some large and heavy body, much larger and heavier than a man, had been dragged from the by-path to the pool. This latter was carefully dragged twice, but nothing was found; and the party were upon the point of going away, in despair of coming to any result, when Providence suggested to Mr. Goodfellow the expediency of draining the water off altogether. This project was received with cheers and many high compliments to "Old Charley" upon his sagacity and consideration. As many of the burghers had brought spades with them, supposing that they might possibly be called upon to disinter a corpse, the drain was easily and speedily effected; and no sooner was the bottom visible than right in the middle of the mud that remained was discovered a black silk velvet waistcoat, which nearly every one present immediately recognized as the property of Mr. Pennifeather. This waistcoat was much torn and stained with blood, and there were several persons among the party who had a distinct remembrance of its having been worn by its owner on the very morning of Mr. Shuttleworthy's departure for the city; while there were others, again, ready to testify upon oath, if required, that Mr. P. did *not* wear the garment in question at any period during the *remainder* of that memorable day; nor could any one be found to say that he had seen it upon Mr. P's person at any period at all subsequent to Mr. Shuttleworthy's disappearance.

Matters now wore a very serious aspect for Mr. Pennifeather, and it was observed, as an indubitable confirmation of the suspicions which were excited against him, that he grew exceedingly pale, and when asked what he had to say for himself, was utterly incapable of saying a word. Hereupon, the few friends his riotous mode of living had left him deserted him at once to a man, and were even more clamorous than his ancient and avowed enemies for his instantaneous arrest. But, on the other hand, the magnanimity of Mr. Goodfellow shone forth with only the more brilliant lustre through contrast. He made a warm and intensely eloquent defence of Mr. Pennifeather, in which he alluded more than once to his own sincere forgiveness of that wild young gentleman— "the heir of the worthy Mr. Goodfellow," — for the insult which he (the young gentleman) had, no doubt in the heat of passion, thought proper to put upon him (Mr. Goodfellow).

"He forgave him for it," he said, "from the very bottom of his heart; and for himself (Mr. Goodfellow), so far from pushing the suspicious circumstances to extremity, which, he was sorry to say, really *had* arisen against Mr. Pennifeather, he (Mr. Goodfellow) would make every exertion in his power, would employ all the little eloquence in his possession to — to — to — soften down, as much as he could conscientiously do so, the worst features of this really exceedingly perplexing piece of business."

Mr. Goodfellow went on for some half hour longer in this strain, very much to the credit both of his head and of his heart; but your warm-hearted people are seldom apposite in their observations—they run into all sorts of blunders, *contre-temps* and *mal apropos-isms*, in the hot-headedness of their zeal to serve a friend—thus, often with the kindest intentions in the world, doing infinitely more to prejudice his cause than to advance it.

So, in the present instance, it turned out with all the eloquence of "Old Charley;" for, although he laboured earnestly in behalf of the suspected, yet it so happened, somehow or other, that every syllable he uttered of which the direct but unwitting tendency was not to exalt the speaker in the good opinion of his audience, had the effect to deepen the suspicion already attached to the individual whose cause he pleaded, and to arouse against him the fury of the mob.

One of the most unaccountable errors committed by the orator was his allusion to the suspected as "the heir of the worthy old gentleman Mr. Goodfellow." The people had really never thought of this before. They had only remembered certain threats of disinheritance uttered a year or two previously by the uncle, (who had no living relative except the nephew;) and they had, therefore, always looked upon this disinheritance as a matter that was settled — so single-minded a race of beings were the Rattleburghers; but the remark of "Old Charley" brought them at once to a consideration of this point, and thus gave them to see the possibility of the threats having been nothing *more* than a threat. And straightway, hereupon, arose the natural question of *cui bono?* — a question that tended even more than the waistcoat to fasten the terrible crime upon the young man. And here, lest I be misunderstood, permit me to digress for one moment merely to observe that the exceedingly brief and simple Latin phrase which I have employed, is invariably mistranslated and misconceived. "*Cui bono,*" in all the crack novels and elsewhere, — in those of Mrs.

Gore, for example, (the author of "Cecil,") a lady who quotes all tongues from the Chaldaean to Chickasaw, and is helped to her learning, "as needed," upon a systematic plan, by Mr. Beckford, — in *all* the crack novels I say, from those of Bulwer and Dickens to those of Turnapenny and Ainsworth, the two little Latin words *cui bono* are rendered "to what purpose," or, (as if *quo bono,*) "to what good." Their true meaning, nevertheless, is "for whose advantage." *Cui,* to whom; *bono,* is for a benefit. It is a purely legal phrase, and applicable precisely in cases such as we have now under consideration, where the probability of the doer of a deed hinges upon the probability of the benefit acruing to this individual or to that from the deed's accomplishment. Now, in the present instance, the question *cui bono* very pointedly implicated Mr. Pennifeather. His uncle had threatened him, after making a will in his favour, with disinheritance. But the threat had not been actually kept; the original will, it appeared, had not been altered. *Had* it been altered, the only supposable motive for murder on the part of the suspected would have been the ordinary one of revenge; and even this would have been counteracted by the hope of reinstation into the good graces of the uncle. But the will being unaltered, while the threat to alter remained suspended over the nephew's head, there appears at once the very strongest possible inducement for the atrocity: and so concluded, very sagaciously, the worthy citizens of the borough of Rattle.

Mr. Pennifeather was, accordingly, arrested upon the spot, and the crowd, after some farther search, proceeded homewards, having him in custody. On the route, however, another circumstance occurred tending to confirm the suspicion entertained. Mr. Goodfellow, whose zeal led him to be always a little in advance of the party, was seen suddeny to run forward a few paces, stoop, and then apparently to pick up some small object from the grass. Having quickly examined it, he was observed, too, to make a sort of half attempt at concealing it in his coat pocket; but this action was noticed, as I say, and consequently prevented, when the object picked up was found to be a Spanish knife, which a dozen persons at once recognized as belonging to Mr. Pennifeather. Moreover, his initials were engraved upon the handle. The blade of this knife was open and bloody.

No doubt now remained of the guilt of the nephew, and immediately upon reaching Rattleborough he was taken before a magistrate for examination.

Here matters again took a most unfavourable turn. The prisoner, being questioned as to his whereabouts on the morning of Mr. Shuttleworthy's disappearance, had absolutely the audacity to acknowledge that on that very morning he had been out with his rifle deer-stalking, in the immediate neighbourhood of the pool where the blood-stained waistcoat had been discovered through the sagacity of Mr. Goodfellow.

This latter now came forward, and, with tears in his eyes, asked permission to be examined. He said that a stern sense of the duty he owed to his Maker, not less than to his fellow men, would permit him no longer to remain silent. Hitherto, the sincerest affection for the young man (notwithstanding the latter's ill treatment of himself, Mr. Goodfellow), had induced him to make every hypothesis which imagination could suggest, by way of endeavouring to account for what appeared suspicious in the circumstances that told so seriously against Mr. Pennifeather; but these circumstances were now altogether *too* convincing—*too* damning; he would hesitate no longer—he would tell all he knew, altogether his heart (Mr. Goodfellow's) should absolutely burst asunder in the effort. He then went on to state that, on the afternoon of the day previous to Mr. Shuttleworthy's departure for the city, that worthy old gentleman had mentioned to his nephew, in *his* hearing, (Mr. Goodfellow's) that his object in going to town on the morrow was to make a deposit of an unusually large sum of money in the "Farmers and Mechanics' Bank," and that, then and there the said Mr. Shuttleworthy had distinctly avowed to the said nephew his irrevocable determination of rescinding the will originally made, and of cutting him off with a shilling. He (the witness) now solemnly called upon the accused to state whether what he (the witness) had just stated was or was not the truth in very substantial particular. Much to the astonishment of every one present, Mr. Pennifeather frankly admitted that *it was*.

The magistrate now considered it his duty to send a couple of constables to search the chamber of the accused in the house of his uncle. From this search they almost immediately returned with the well known steel-bound, russet leather pocketbook which the old gentleman had been in the habit of carrying for years. Its valuable contents, however, had been abstracted, and the magistrate in vain endeavoured to extort from the prisoner the use which had been made of them, or the place of their con-

cealment. Indeed, he obstinately denied all knowledge of the matter. The constables, also, discovered, between the bed and sacking of the unhappy man, a shirt and neck-handkerchief both marked with the initials of his name, and both hideously besmeared with the blood of the victim.

At this juncture, it was announced that the horse of the murdered man had just expired in the stable from the effects of the wound he had received, and it was proposed by Mr. Goodfellow that a *post mortem* examination of the beast should be immediately made, with the view, if possible, of discovering, the ball. This was accordingly done, and, as if to demonstrate beyond a question the guilt of the accused, Mr. Goodfellow, after considerable searching in the cavity of the chest, was enabled to detect and to pull forth a bullet of very extraordinary size, which upon trial, was found to be exactly adapted to the bore of Mr. Pennifeather's rifle, while it was far too large for that of any other person in the borough or its vicinity. To render the matter even surer yet, however, this bullet was discovered to have a flaw or seam at right angles to the usual suture; and upon examination, this seam corresponded precisely with an accidental ridge or elevation in a pair of moulds acknowledged by the accused himself to be his own property. Upon the finding of this bullet, the examining magistrate refused to listen to any farther testimony, and immediately committed the prisoner for trial —declining resolutely to take any bail in the case, although against this severity Mr. Goodfellow very warmly remonstrated, and offered to become surety in whatever amount might be required. This generosity on the part of "Old Charley" was only in accordance with the whole tenour of his amiable and chivalrous conduct during the entire period of his sojourn in the borough of Rattle. In the present instance, the worthy man was so entirely carried away by the excessive warmth of his sympathy, that he seemed to have quite forgotten, when he offered to go bail for his young friend, that he himself (Mr. Goodfellow) did not possess a single dollar's worth of property upon the face of the earth.

The result of the committal may be readily foreseen. Mr. Pennifeather, amid the loud execrations of all Rattleborough, was brought to trial at the next criminal sessions, when the chain of circumstantial evidence (strengthened as it was by some additional damning facts, which Mr. Goodfellow's sensitive conscientiousness forbade him to

withhold from the court), was considered so unbroken and so thoroughly conclusive, that the jury, without leaving their seats, returned an immediate verdict of *"Guilty of murder in the first degree."* Soon afterwards the unhappy wretch received sentence of death, and was remanded to the county jail to await the inexorable vengeance of the law.

In the mean time, the noble behaviour of "Old Charley Goodfellow" had doubly endeared him to the honest citizens of the borough. He became ten times a greater favourite than ever; and, as a natural result of the hospitality with which he was treated, he relaxed, as it were, perforce, the extremely parsimonious habits which his poverty had hitherto impelled him to observe, and very frequently had little *reunions* at his own house, when wit and jollity reigned supreme—dampened a little, *of course*, by the occasional remembrance of the untoward and melancholy fate which impended over the nephew of the late lamented bosom friend of the generous host.

One fine day, this magnanimous old gentleman was agreeably surprised at the receipt of the following letter:—

"Charles Goodfellow, Esquire—

"Dear Sir—In conformity with an order transmitted to our firm about two months since, by our esteemed correspondent, Mr. Barnabas Shuttleworthy, we have the honour of forwarding this morning, to your address, a double box of Chateau-Margaux, of the antelope brand, violet seal. Box numbered and marked as per margin.

"We remain, sir,

"Your most ob'nt ser'ts,

"Hoggs, Frogs, Bogs & Co.

"City of—, June 21st, 18—.

"P. S.—*The box will reach you, by wagon, on the day after your receipt of this letter. Our respects to Mr. Shuttleworthy.*

H. F. B. & Co."

The fact is, that Mr. Goodfellow had, since the death of Mr. Shuttleworthy, given over all expectation of ever receiving the promised Chateau Margaux; and he, therefore, looked upon it *now* as a sort of especial dispensation of Providence in his behalf. He was highly delighted, of course, and, in the exuberance of his joy, invited a large party of friends to a *petit souper* on the morrow, for the purpose of broaching the good old Mr. Shuttleworthy's present. Not that he *said* any thing about "the good old Mr. Shuttleworthy" when he issued the invitations. The fact is, he thought much and concluded to say nothing at all. He did *not* mention to any one—if I remember aright—that he had received a *present* of Chateau-Margaux. He merely

asked his friends to come and help him to drink some, of a remarkably fine quality and rich flavour, that he had ordered up from the city a couple of months ago, and of which he would be in the receipt upon the morrow. I have often puzzled myself to imagine *why* it was that "Old Charley" came to the conclusion to say nothing about having received the wine from his old friend, but I could never precisely understand his reason for the silence, although he had *some* excellent and very magnanimous reason, no doubt.

The morrow at length arrived and with it a very large and highly respectable company at Mr. Goodfellow's house. Indeed, half the borough was there—I myself among the number—but much to the vexation of the host, the Chateau-Margaux did not arrive until a late hour, and when the sumptuous supper supplied by "Old Charley" had been done very ample justice by the guests. It came at length, however,—a monstrously big box of it there was, too,—and as the whole party were in excessively good humour, it was decided, *nem. con.*, that it should be lifted upon the table and its contents disemboweled forthwith.

No sooner said than done. I lent a helping hand; and, in a trice, we had the box upon the table, in the midst of all the bottles and glasses, not a few of which were demolished in the scuffle. "Old Charley," who was pretty much intoxicated, and excessively red in the face, now took a seat, with an air of mock dignity, at the head of the board, and thumped furiously upon it with a decanter, calling upon the company to keep order "during the ceremony of disinterring the treasure."

After some vociferation, quiet was at length fully restored, and as very often happens in similar cases, a profound and remarkable silence ensued. Being then requested to force open the lid, I complied, of course, "with an infinite deal of pleasure." I inserted a chisel, and giving it a few slight taps with a hammer, the top of the box flew suddenly and violently off, and, at the same instant, there sprang up into a sitting position, directly facing the host, the bruised, bloody and nearly putrid corpse of the murdered Mr. Shuttleworthy himself. It gazed for a few moments, fixedly and sorrowfully, with its decaying and lacklustre eyes, full into the countenance of Mr. Goodfellow; uttered slowly, but clearly and impressively, the words—"Thou art the man!" and then, falling over the side of the chest as if thoroughly satisfied, stretched out its limbs quiveringly upon the table.

The scene that ensued is alto-

gether beyond description. The rush for the doors and windows was terrific, and many of the most robust *men* in the room fainted outright through sheer horror. But after the first wild, shrieking burst of affright, all eyes were directed to Mr. Goodfellow. If I live a thousand years, I can never forget the more than mortal agony which was depicted in that ghastly face of his, so lately rubicund with triumph and wine. For several minutes, he sat rigidly as a statue of marble; his eyes seeming, in the intense vacancy of their gaze, to be turned inwards and absorbed in the contemplation of his own miserable murderous soul. At length, their expression appeared to flash suddenly out into the external world, when, with a quick leap, he sprang from his chair, and shoulders upon the table, poured out rapidly and vehemently a detailed confession of the hideous crime for which Mr. Pennifeather was then imprisoned and doomed to die.

What he recounted was, in substance, this:—He followed his victim to the vicinity of the pool; there shot his horse with a pistol; despatched the rider with its butt end; possessed himself of the pocket-book; and supposing the horse dead, dragged it with great labour to the brambles by the pond. Upon his own beast he slung the corpse of Mr. Shuttleworthy, and bore it to a secure place of concealment a long distance off through the woods.

The waistcoat, the knife, the pocket-book and the bullet, had been placed by himself where found with the view of avenging himself upon Mr. Pennifeather. He had also contrived the discovery of the stained handkerchief and shirt.

Towards the end of the blood-chilling recital, the words of the guilty wretch faltered and grew hollow. When the record was finally exhausted, he arose, staggered backwards from the table, and fell—*dead*.

The means by which this happily-timed confession was extorted, although efficient, were simple indeed. Mr. Goodfellow's excess of frankness had disgusted me, and excited my suspicion from the first. I was present when Mr. Pennifeather had struck him, and the fiendish expression which then arose upon his countenance, although momentary, assured me that his threat of vengenance would, if possible, be rigidly fulfilled. I was thus prepared to view the *manoeuvring* of "Old Charley" in a very different light from that in which it was regarded by the good citizens of Rattelborough. I saw at once that all the criminating discoveries arose, either directly or indirectly, from himself. But the fact which clear-

ly opened my eyes to the true state of the case, was the affair of the bullet, *found* by Mr. G. in the carcass of the horse. *I* had not forgotten, although the Rattleburghers *had*, that there was a hole where the ball had entered the horse, and another where it *went out*. If it were found in the animal then, after having made its exit, I saw clearly that it must have been deposited by the person who found it. The bloody shirt and handkerchief confirmed the idea suggested by the bullet; for the blood upon examination proved to be capital claret, and no more. When I came to think of these things, and also of the late increase of liberality and expenditure on the part of Mr. Goodfellow, I entertained a suspicion none the less strong because I kept it altogether to myself.

In the meantime, I instituted a rigorous private search for the corpse of Mr. Shuttleworthy, and, for good reasons, searched in quarters as divergent as possible from those to which Mr. Goodfellow conducted his party. The result was that, after some days, I came across an old dry well, the mouth of which was nearly hidden by brambles; and here at the bottom, I discovered what I sought.

Now it so happened that I had overheard the colloquy between the two cronies, when Mr. Goodfellow had contrived to cajole his host into the promise of a box of Chateau-Margaux. Upon this hint I acted. I procured a stiff piece of whalebone, thrust it down the throat of the corpse, and deposited the latter in an old wine box — taking care so to double the body up as to double the whalebone with it. In this matter I had to press forcibly upon the lid to keep it down while I secured it with nails; and I anticipated, of course, that as soon as these latter were removed, the top would fly *off* and the body fly *up*.

Having thus arranged the box, I marked, numbered and addressed it as already told; and then writing a letter in the name of the wine merchants with whom Mr. Shuttleworthy dealt, I gave instructions to my servant to wheel the box to Mr. Goodfellow's door, in a barrow, at a given signal from myself. For the words which I intended the corpse to speak, I confidently depended upon my ventriloquial abilities; for their effect, I counted upon the conscience of the murderous wretch.

I believe there is nothing more to be explained. Mr. Pennifeather was released upon the spot, inherited the fortune of his uncle, profited by the lessons of experience, turned over a new leaf, and led happily ever afterwards a new life.

a suit of armour

by James Laver

When people hear that you have "been in a museum" for the last 30 years, they are inclined to laugh, and even to make rather feeble jokes about mummies and glass cases. Or else to wonder what you can possibly do all day.

One of the things I do is to see visitors, and they range from the cultivated and learned to the frankly cracked. One of the most interesting – though he wasn't cracked; far from it—was a man who came to see me more than a quarter of a century ago.

Like many visitors to a museum, he had something to sell; in this case a suit of armour, and he brought a photograph to show us what it looked like. It looked interesting enough, a fine, complete suit of late Gothic armour with beautifully fitting overlapping plates and of course the sharp pointed steel sabatons or shoes.

The visitor was a distinguished looking man, middle-aged and with a slight foreign accent.

He had a grizzled beard and piercing dark eyes, and his clothes were far from smart.

He spoke of his "studio" and said the armour he had to sell could be seen there. Would I

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come and see it? I was sufficiently interested to agree. It was, he said, in one of the back streets of Hammersmith.

Well, I made my way there on the day appointed. The house looked pretty derelict and the whole of the basement was occupied by a kind of workshop. There seemed to be another workshop behind in what had once been an open yard which was now roofed in; and in this inner room I caught, through the open door, a glimpse of an anvil and what looked like a forge, not, at the moment, in operation.

The suit of armour I had come to see stood in the middle of the outer room and, at first glance, it seemed a magnificent specimen, not only beautifully made, but complete. And complete suits of this period are exceedingly rare; there is always something missing.

He was looking at me closely as I examined it, and when he saw me glancing towards the inner room he said:

"As you have guessed, my friend, I repair armour. Perhaps I am one of the few people in Europe capable of doing so. The pieces that have come down to us are often in such a deplorable condition. Bits of one suit and bits of another all jumbled together. This suit in particular gave me a lot of trouble."

I examined one of the pauldrons, or shoulder-pieces. "Are you sure," I said, "that this pauldron was really part of the same suit?"

He grew excited. "But you can see it is," he cried. "It matches perfectly And it is so beautifully made."

"It is, as you say, beautifully made. There can't be many people alive today who are as skilful as the old armourers."

"What do you mean?"

I turned on him. "*You* made it, didn't you? All this part of the suit is modern. I congratulate you on an astounding piece of work. But I don't think I want to buy the suit for the museum."

"Compliment for compliment" he said "If there are very few people who could have made that bit of the suit today there are very few people who could have detected it once it was made!" He paused and then added thoughtfully: "Once it was made—by me."

In spite of his attempted fraud I couldn't help liking the man. There was something rather engaging about the frank way he had accepted the situation, once he realised that the game was up.

"How did you manage to learn so much about armour?"

"Before the war," he said (he meant, of course, the Kaiser's war) "I worked at Graz. There

is an extensive armoury there, as perhaps you know—"

And for a time we talked about this and other armouries in Eastern Europe, with all of which he seemed perfectly familiar, and we parted on excellent terms.

I heard nothing of him for years; and then, one day, when I opened The Times, I saw an account of the attempted assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia at Zegreb.

As the king passed through the crowd, the would-be assassin had raised his hand to throw a bomb. But the bomb had slipped from his grasp.

He was blown to pieces, but the upper part of his body was almost untouched, and there was a photograph in the newspaper of his head and shoulders emerging from a bloodstained sheet. The beard, the face were those of my old friend.

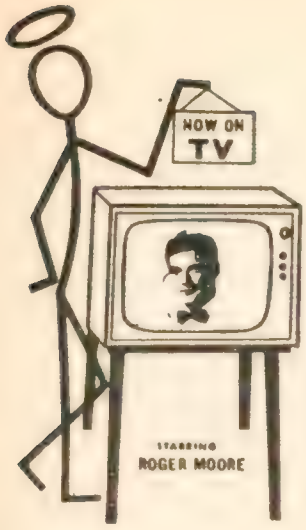
The international police followed the train until it led them to the workshop in Hammersmith, and there, among the pieces of old armour, in the back room where I had seen the forge, they found all the apparatus necessary for his purpose.

It was a double blind. Behind the repairer of armour was the forger of armour, and behind the forger of armour—the maker of bombs.

ABOUT THE MAFIA

When Mussolini came to power an entire generation of Mafia leaders found themselves under arrest and were given either life sentences or banished to what were even then referred to only (and politely) as "lonely islands". These men who have now come to prominence in the Society are yesterday's young "soldiers", if we may use Valachi's term for them, and of course the personalities, important and less important, who've in the intervening years been deported to Italy from this country.

There is hardly an business activity in Palermo, and in other cities in Sicily, in whch the Mafia has not taken a kindly interest. You hire the people selected by the Mafia and pay them the suggested wages—if you are wise. It is estimated by the police that more than five hundred people have been killed by the Mafia since World War II . . . Many labor leaders have been among the Society's victims.



LESLIE CHARTERIS'

The saint on TV

NOW THE SAINT GOES RESPECTABLE

By DAVID LEWIN

A rare and fascinating encounter yesterday . . .

Between: Leslie Charteris, author and creator of The Saint, and Roger Moore, the man who plays the Saint on the Sunday night television show.

They met on a sound stage at Elstree studios where *The Saint* is being filmed—one episode every nine days. The series—like the books—has gone around the world, to America, Germany, Sweden, Holland, Spain and even Japan.

The Saint is what is known in the profession as a "hot property" and Charteris guards his work, which has sold 22 million books, with cool-eyed caution.

Roger Moore, the TV Saint, said: "I can only look like me and take on part of the character I play. The Saint is a superman out of the ordinary, and only made credible by the skill of the writers on this series in getting him into situations and showing how he deals with them."

For television, Charteris does not write his own scripts; he keeps a watching brief as a consultant, and about a dozen writers take care of the episodes between them. Charteris often does not care for what he sees.

He said: "I don't quite follow this bit about Superman. I didn't plan him as that."

Moore: "But no one can do all the things the Saint does. And I am limited, too, by the television code of heroes. Although the villain kicks me in the stomach I can never be shown being responsible for his

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death. Heroes on TV do not kill.

"I cannot even use Karate, a method of unarmed combat at which the Saint would excel, because that is barred. And I cannot open locks with celluloid because small boys might copy it."

Charteris pondered the point. Then he said: "What do you do for money—your Saint, I mean? Mine would take the loot from the villains and before handing it back to the people who have been robbed he would take out his cut to live on and for expenses. Where is the TV Saint supposed to get his money from? Women?"

Moore: "That's the hero's code too. I must hand back all the money. I can't keep anything and I never seem to earn anything."

The TV series is a success, although for many—myself included—it is a soft-water version of the original.

Charteris: "The trouble is the Saint has gone respectable. Not only on TV but even in some of the more recent stories I have written. The older Saint fans tell me so. It is a sign of the times, this respectability.

"When I created the Saint nearly 35 years ago, he had a rakishness with a buccaneer's face. But even magazines want him toned down a bit, and he is no longer so much of a buccaneer.

"Raffles, who used to rob just for the hell of robbing, could not be published at all today. Not respectable enough.

"So I suppose I ought to redraw the Saint . . . with a couple of haloes and an umbrella."

Leslie Charteris, who is a healthy, tanned six-footer, looking ten years younger than his 56 years, saw the Saint like this when he first developed him: 6 ft. 2 in., 12 stone, broad shoulders, athletic, with black hair and bright blue eyes.

Roger Moore is 6 ft. 2 in., weighs 13st., has dark brown hair worn rather long, and "washed-out pinky-grey eyes"

Charteris has been urging him for some time to get his hair cut, so far without success.

The Saint has already appeared in films—ten of them—usually with George Sanders or Louis Hayward in the title role. Charteris was satisfied with none of them and felt that his Saint should be someone with a dash of Cary Grant and the late Ronald Colman.

To Roger Moore he said: "You're younger than I've made the Saint lately (Moore is 35), but your performance is better than any other actor in the part so far.

"But if I had been writing for TV from the beginning, instead of books, I don't know how the Saint would have progressed—if at all."

instrument of death

by Wenzell Brown

I have frequently been told that I have no sense of humor.

Unfortunately this is true.

Another man might have died laughing at the practical joke that was played on me.

As for myself, unless all signs fail, I shall die in the electric chair exactly one week from today.

But at least permit me to tell my own story in my dry humorless fashion.

My name is Herbert Titcomb Basset. My age is fifty. The crime of which I stand convicted is murder in the first degree.

During my trial I was variously described by reporters as "a stuffed shirt," "the prototype of the successful American business man," "a gay philanderer with a a roving eye for a well-turned calf" and "a vainglorious simpleton."

In each of these seemingly contradictory descriptions there is a grain of verity. I am reluctantly forced to the conclusion that I suffer from a split personality of the Jekyll-Hyde type. It is something I have long suspected of myself.

Wenzell Brown will be remembered by readers of this magazine for his superb WITNESS TO MURDER (SDM, July 1958, etc. etc. Mr. Brown, whose novels about the minority groups in our northern cities should be required reading for social workers and others working with them, is the author of more than thirty books including the recent SHERRY (Monarch) and WOMEN WHO DIED IN THE CHAIR (Collier), etc. Many of his books deal not only with matters which are the raw material of tonight's headlines, but also with the motivations for these crimes or acts of violence. H.S.S.

However, during the span of half a century, I have comported myself, in large, in such a fashion as to win the approbation, even the plaudits, of a responsible society. The baser side of my nature has come to the fore only on the rarest of occasions.

I have confronted my mirror with sufficient frequency so that I am fully aware of my appearance. I am neither a handsome man nor an exceptionally ugly one. My hair is my most salient feature. It is thick, stiff as wire and, though it is now growing gray at the temples, it retains its original tan coloration in the center. By necessity I comb it straight back from my broad, rather low forehead. My eyebrows are shaggy. The eyes themselves are brown with a constant hint of moisture. The rest of my face is pushed squarely forward, heavy jowled but firm and strictly oblong. Big squarish teeth, tinted yellow, give a finishing touch to a countenance that is indisputably canine. This, together with my unfortunate surname, has given rise to an endless series of sophomoric puns which have plagued me from the time of my earliest recollections.

I will resist the temptation to linger over the traumas of childhood. Let it suffice to say that I was raised in the strict traditions of puritanical New England. My ancestors, my father included, were mostly clergymen, albeit they were shrewd business men on the side.

At an early age I recognized that I was not gifted with charm, high intelligence or an engaging personality. I compensated by an earnest endeavor to conform. I was a good boy who studied hard, obeyed the rules and never raised my voice in revolt against authority. Above all I strove to remain inconspicuous in dress, in manner and even in achievement. This was not always easy. My very seriousness, made me the butt of my schoolmates' ridicule.

When this occurred, try as I would, I could not conceal my resentment. My tormentors, delighted by my sullen anger, would be spurred on to fresh efforts to embarrass me.

There was an afternoon when I was eleven when a group of older boys surrounded me.

They quipped, "The way old Basset sucks up to the teacher you'd think he was a dog."

"You know something. We ought to call him Fido."

"Sure. Let's see you sit up and beg, Fido."

I bore their taunts as long as I could, though I was shaking with an inner fury that brought tears to my eyes. Then suddenly my rage exploded into mur-

derous violence. I attacked blindly. Though clumsy, I was large for my age and powerful. My hands clamped about the throat of one of the boys and we tumbled to the ground together. He thrashed beneath me, gripping my wrists, but I would not let him go. I think I would have choked him to death if his friends had not fallen upon me, pried me loose and rolled me on the earth, kicking and punching me.

I lay there for a long time, wracked with sobs and gasping for breath. My suit was badly torn and I was covered with filth. When I got home I knew there would be an accounting but I resolved never to disclose the cause of the fight. Even to this day I cannot hear the word "Fido" without wincing.

My punishment was confinement to the house after school for a month.

I filled in the lonely hours with reading. I discovered D'Artagnan, Scaramouche, The Scarlet Pimpernel and a host of other swashbuckling heroes. From that time on, I was never alone. There was always a figure besides me, my alter ego of the moment, a handsome dashing mountebank selected from some romantic novel.

Outwardly I remained unchanged, a plodding hard- working youth. But my dreams expanded to adventures on the field of battle and in the China Seas. With adolescence they included amorous conquests of a nature, which, I was sure, would have scandalized my rock- ribbed parents if they had known of them.

I was far from unaware of the feminine pulchritude of the girls who shared my classes in high school and later on the campus of the state university. But I held myself rigidly aloof, too shy, too uncertain of myself, too fearful of a rebuff to ask for a date. Besides a memory haunted me. A memory of my hands pressing harder and harder on a human throat. My frantic desire to stifle forever the mocking laughter that was directed against me.

In college I was a "loner", not through choice but because of my incapacity to mingle. My voice would grow stilted, my manner stiff and unbending. I heard myself described as egotistical and pompous. But I learned something else. My fellow students regarded me with a certain degree of awe. They might laugh at me behind my back but they did not dare ridicule me openly. With deliberation I adopted a severity of demeanor that would discourage their jests. I applied myself more assiduously than ever to my studies and developed a

certain obscure style of phraseology and a niggling interest in detail which passes for scholarship.

Then in my senior year Joe Coburn came into my life. Joe roomed across the hall from me in the dormitory. He was a devil-may-care sort of fellow, darkly handsome, with a satanic cast to his features. Black hair grew in a widow's peak low over his olive-skinned forehead. His features were long and narrow, with high cheekbones and hollowed cheeks. His smile cut a gleaming white swathe across his dark face.

Joe was always broke and never cracked a book. From time to time he dropped into my room for what he called "a bull session." In reality he came to cadge a dollar or two, to borrow my car or to ask some other favor. He was a born con-man, a master of cajolery and flattery. I knew I was a sucker but I never could resist him.

Fortunately I had a small inheritance so that I could afford those hand-outs. After an evening at my expense, Joe would regale me with stories of his exploits, sometimes including clinical details which embarrassed me. But I was envious too. Joe was the sort of man who, in some secret part of my being, I would like to have been.

Then came the night that Joe put the pressure on for me to join him.

"Come on Herbie, old boy," he coaxed. "Quit frittering away your youth with a bunch of charts and term papers. Live it up for awhile. Toss the books out the window and spend a night on the tiles. I got a couple of sweet little numbers lined up. One of them would go for you in a big way. So get off your duff. Let's see some action."

I hesitated, torn between timidity and my desire to prove myself a man.

Joe seemed to sense my mood. He spoke with the selfconscious sincerity of the salesman.

"Some guys around here say you're a prig, a mealy-mouthed, holier - than - thou hypocrite. I keep telling them they're all wet. All you need to do is cut loose once in awhile. You know something? You're big and you're virile. Give the girls a chance and they'll crawl right into your pockets. So what do you say, Herbie?"

After that my resistance was no more than a token to salve my conscience.

My memories of that night are fragmentary. For the first time in my life I imbibed liquor and became gloriously drunk. We ended up in the back room of a nightclub called The Coven. There was more liquor, the

throbbing pulse of a jazz band, dancing, laughter and pretty girls.

My amatory dreams assumed reality. I felt hot, yielding lips against my own and pressed soft young flesh in my arms.

Sometime in the wee hours of the morning I passed out. When I awakened I was lying on the bed in my room, nursing a giant-sized hangover.

Joe hovered over me.

"Herbie, what did I tell you? You were the life of the party. Where'd you learn that wicked Charleston? Boy, you kept us all in stitches."

Even though my head felt like an over-inflated ballon and my stomach heaved, a thrill of pleasure passed through me, only faintly tainted with remorse.

I looked forward to more such nights with Joe but in this I was to be disappointed. The following weekend Joe took off on his own. On Saturday night The Coven was raided and the students who were corralled there were expelled from the university. Joe was among them.

My face became beaded with cold sweat when I learned of my narrow escape. I resolved to put the episode firmly behind me and devote myself more conscientously than ever to my studies. Yet I could not completely forget the experience. I alternated between joyous reminiscence and the shadowy conviction that I had made a consummate fool of myself.

I graduated from the university and moved on to law school in a nearby city. Law, with all its anachronistic intricasies fascinated me. Soon I was completely absorbed in my work.

As for Joe Coburn, I thought I had seen the last of him.

In this I was mistaken. One afternoon he appeared at my quarters. He was slightly drunk, completely broke and had "two little beauties" sitting outside in a car.

I need not go into the details of that night. It was a virtual repetition of the one at The Coven.

After that Joe showed up on my doorstep on an average of once a year. The pattern of our evenings varied only in detail. I enjoyed them, suffered briefly from the pangs of guilt and plunged back into my daily routine.

There were times when I sallied forth to adventures on my own. Such exploits always had a way of turning sour. Unlike Joe, I was not a true philanderer. Without him to break the ice, I suffered innumerable rebuffs and indignities.

And then there came a night when I was genuinely and deeply frightened. My courage bolstered by a generous supply

of bourbon, I wandered into a bar in the bohemian quarter of the city.

I selected my quarry, a curvaceous redhead in a bottle green suit, seated alone on a stool at the end of the bar.

My approach was cautious, even timid, for I was beset by qualms induced by previous unfortunate experiences. Joe's blustering assurance might have worked but I was stiff and awkward.

I sidled up to the girl but she did not look in my direction. I coughed self-consciously and touched her tentatively on the arm.

She lifted a bleary face. She was older than I had thought and not nearly so attractive. I would have liked to have withdraw but could think of no dignified way in which to do so.

She said, "Take your filthy hands off me, you creep."

I stuttered, "My dear young lady, I only wished to proffer you a drink."

"Ye gods! Proffer no less. A stuck-up Ivy League prig. Beat it, Buster, before I get sore and slap that limp wrist of yours."

By this time the bar had grown quiet and I had the eerie feeling of standing naked beneath a glaring spotlight on an empty stage.

My pride would not let me retreat. I made a stiff little bow and turned to the bar to order a drink.

But she would not let it drop. She continued to hurl abuse at my back.

She screamed, "Listen, you dog-faced Romeo, I don't want you even standing near me." She added a choice round of expletives too painful to repeat.

The blood drained from my face and I swung around to face her. Then my hands shot out without any conscious volition on my part. I grabbed her by the throat and began to shake her. Her screams echoed all around me and goaded me on to madness.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of the bartender vaulting the bar, a sawed-off billiard cue in his hand. With flawless precision he brought it down against the back of my head.

I staggered and would have collapsed but already he had my arm in a hammerlock that brought me to my toes. Ignominiously I was frog-marched the length of the bar and out onto the sidewalk. A parting kick in the posterior sent me sprawling into the gutter.

I picked myself up with as much dignity as was possible. My first impulse was to rush back into the bar to wage battle. But some remnant of sanity warned me that I would gain

nothing but a beating and possible arrest.

By now a ring of curious bystanders surrounded me. I pulled myself erect and stalked away. Even hours later it seemed to me that I could hear the echo of their gloating laughter.

I resolved that night to obey the proprieties, to never play the role of philanderer again. At least not without Joe to act as guide and mentor.

The year that I was admitted to the bar I accepted a post in the legal department of the advertising firm of Meade and Schaeffer. My rise, if not spectacular, was certainly rapid. I soon became a master of the obscure phasing which is an integral part of the fine print in minor clauses of contracts. I have heard myself described as a genius of obfuscation. As such I was invaluable to my employers

Five years later when a vacancy occurred as departmental head of the New York office, I was assigned to the post. It was at this time that I met Bernice.

She was the daughter of Hampton Meade, the senior member of the firm. When I first encountered her in the office I was impressed by a sense of stillness about her, her immaculate grooming, her skin which was like fine porcelain. She was tall and slender, with a slow languid grace of movement and a precise manner of speaking.

In our early meetings my attitude toward her was deferential, touched with awe. It did not occur to me that I could aspire to any closer intimacy.

However Hampton Meade sought out opportunities to throw us together. He even went so far as to hint at marriage and monetary rewards that would fellow.

I was not averse to the idea but Bernice appeared indifferent. She accepted my invitations to dinner and the theatre but without undue enthusiasm. There were times, however, when I thought I glimpsed some inner fire. I had visions of her passionate response to my embraces but I was too shy to put myself to the test.

Then came the night in which we ran into Joe Coburn. It was in one of those candle-lit, tearoomish restaurants which Bernice favored but it was about the last place in the world which I would have expected to have drawn Joe's patronage.

We were seated at a corner table when Joe came in, accompanied by a rather frowsy blonde. I pretended absorption in the menu, hoping against hope that Joe would take the hint and pass us by.

Instead he swooped down on us, clapping me on the back.

"Herbie, old boy! You're a sight for sore eyes. Boy, am I glad to see you."

His eyes roved over Bernice in frankly admiring appraisal.

"Same old Herbie! You sure know how to pick 'em. Best looking bit of fluff I've laid my eyes on in a year of blue moons."

There was no way of preventing him from sitting at our table. No way of stemming his flow of ribald compliments. He ignored the blonde completely, directing all his attention to Bernice. She flushed, looked down at her plate and drew back from his questing fingers. But somehow I gathered the impression that she was not altogether displeased.

That night, when I took her home, she turned to me at the door.

She said calmly, "I think you'd better marry me, Herbert."

I was too taken aback to do anything but stare.

She went on in a level voice. "Yes, you're eminently suitable and of course father will approve. His only complaint about you is that you lack humor. Incidentally, he says the same of me."

I tried to kiss her then but she twisted her face so that our lips merely brushed. Hers were cool and she slipped out of my embrace and was gone before I could stop her. I was left facing a closed door.

Bernice insisted on a long engagement, interlarded with serious talks about our future together. One of her favorite topics was divorce. She herself was the victim of a broken home and was bitter about it.

Several times she said, "If you marry me, Herbert, it will be for good. I'll never divorce you or let you divorce me." She precluded all pre-marital intimacies beyond an occasional tepid kiss. I raised no strenuous objections. In a way I approved for I imagined that with marriage the dam of her self-restraint would break and we would both be caught up in a delirium of passion. I contented myself with writing her love letters and a sentimental sonnet or two.

Our wedding was a rather splendid affair but, to my surprise, Bernice insisted that there should be no honeymoon.

She explained with her little brittle laugh, "I don't want to start our marriage by being seasick or living in strange hotels. The sooner we settle down comfortably the better."

Bernice found and furnished the apartment on Park Avenue. I did not see it until our wedding night.

There were separate bedrooms.

"I hope you don't mind, Her-

bert," she said. "After all everyone is entitled to a little privacy."

I kissed her but she pulled away from my embrace.

"Please, Herbert. I'm exhausted. All I want now is to get some rest. You do understand, don't you, darling?"

"Of course," I said with a show of gallantry.

She gave me a peck on the cheek. "You're so considerate, dear. That's why I married you."

She went into her bedroom and I heard the click of the lock. I was left staring at the blank panels of the door.

A half dozen times during the night I tiptoed to her room. There was no sound of stirring from within and the knob did not move under my hand.

Bernice led a life that was a mystery to me. It seemed to be composed of appointments with hairdressers, musicales, bridge parties and calls upon innumerable friends all of whom were identified merely as Jeannie, Betty, Louise or Maude.

I was not always excluded from her bower, but her bedroom door was far more often locked than not. Even when Bernice granted her favors she made me feel an intruder, as though in some way I had taken a mean advantage of my position as her husband.

As an antidote for my frustration I sought refuge in my work. I had been raised to the position of vice-president with a commensurate increase in salary. I was not altogether unhappy but when Joe dropped around to my office one day I needed no urging to accompany him on our annual spree.

The pattern of my life had become established. I lived among the sterile accoutrements of success. I had a beautiful but cold wife, a childless marriage. My work became increasingly routine. More and more I looked forward to the frenetic joys of a weekend under the aegis of Joe Coburn.

Year followed monotonous year. My girth expanded, my weight increased, my hair turned gray and my manner became more rigid and unbending. Other than that nothing changed. Not until my fiftieth birthday.

It was the first warm day of spring and the air had the fresh, heady scent of wine which is so seldom found in New York. I had returned to the apartment for luncheon but Bernice was absent, apparently on a shopping tour. Ernestine, the maid, had served me a lonely meal, after which I had decided to stroll back to my office.

I swung my cane jauntily and my thoughts were reminiscent of youth. Ahead of me two young women, with the trim figures and erect carriages of models,

stopped at an intersection. A mischievous breeze whipped up their skirts. I stared in appreciation at long lovely legs. In fact, I am afraid I ogled.

One of the girls rolled overly large eyes at me in a flirtatious fashion.

"Hi, Mr. Money-bags! Did you get a good look?"

The other said, "Oh, Marie, you ought to be ashamed speaking that way to the nice man."

I could feel a flush mounting to my cheeks. I should very much liked to have spoken some clever bit of bandinage which might have induced the girls to linger for a few moments. But I was tongue-tied. All I could do was huff and puff while I watched them dart across the street against the red light.

Inevitably my thoughts flew to Joe Coburn and how he would have handled the situation. Joe had been absent from my life longer than usual. A stir of uneasiness passed through me at the thought of our last meeting. Instead of coming to the office, as was his custom, he had visited me at the apartment. I had returned home to find him seated with Bernice in the front room. Her color was a trifle high and there was an unwonted brightness in her eyes. I looked from one to the other in perplexity. Knowing Joe's propensities, I wondered if he had insulted my wife. It even flashed across my mind that she might be a willing partner in a mild flirtation. But considering Bernice's cold demeanor and her strict propriety, the suspicion seemed most unlikely.

Bernice had risen quickly and left the room. Joe had put the arm on me for a loan of a thousand dollars which he claimed to need for a business trip to California. Behind his cajolery was a thinly veiled demand that smacked of blackmail. To the best of my knowledge Joe had never repaid a loan in his life. However, I was scarcely in a position to offer resistance.

Now, as I renewed my stroll, I reflected that Joe was probably still in California. Perhaps it was all for the best. At fifty I should be content with the sane sober life I led. Yet all the time something was crying within me, denying my age, demanding one final fling, a transient return to the romantic dreams of my youth.

When I was within a dozen feet of the revolving door of my office building, fingers clamped on my shoulder and a booming voice thundered in my ear.

"Herbie Basset! Herbie, old man. Long time no see."

My hand was seized and pumped up and down with a vigor that threatened to pull my arm from its socket. A resounding clap on the back sent me reeling against the wall.

Needless to say, it was Joe Coburn. I looked up into his bronzed face, thinking how little the years had changed him. His features had broadened, grown somewhat coarse, but his hair was still black, his figure lean and youthful.

His words poured over me. "I been up to that hip mausoleum you call an office. And what do they tell me? The big shot's out for lunch. So here I've been, cooling my heels, waiting to do you the biggest favor of your life. Man, oh man! Wait till you see the sweet little stick o' candy I brought for you. Your eyes'll pop right out of your head."

I started to sputter a protest, feigning reluctance. It was part of a game we played, each knowing I would surrender after a token resistance.

He gripped my arm and propelled me along the sidewalk. Midway along the block a white Buick convertible was parked. Its top was down and a girl in white sat in the front seat. She turned and waved. I had a glimpse of close- cropped blonde hair, tanned skin, a pretty vivacious face. Then Joe was performing introductions.

"Wendy, sweetheart. Here's the guy I was telling you about. Herbie's a prince. He's the greatest. The best friend I ever had."

I winced but I was flattered too. Wendy's hand was soft in mine Then Joe was tugging at me, laughing.

"Hey, Herbie! Don't steal my girl. Look what I got for you."

He spun me half way around to face the second girl in the car. She was pressed in the corner of the back seat and I had not noticed her until then.

"Linda Storrow, the girl of your dreams! Isn't she lovely? What do you say, Herbie?"

My breath sucked in at the sight of her. She was dressed all in pink. A floppy hat. Wide skirts which flounced about her concealing her figure. A wistful child's face peered out from beneath the wide rim, wan and serious and pathetically young. I had the fleeting impression of a forsaken doll.

Then she leaned forward to take my hand and I saw the body was too ripe for the child-like features. Full breasts strained against her bodice. There was a certain awkwardness to her movements and she smiled almost shyly. But the smile that lit up her face had an inner glow.

The flow of Joe's words had not ceased but I was not listening. His prodding fingers demanded my attention.

"Pile on in, Herbie old boy. We'll go for a spin in the country. Some fresh air will sweep the cobwebs out of your brain."

Automatically I glanced at my watch, thinking of the afternoon's schedule.

"I've got to get back," I stammered. "Business before pleasure, you know."

"Old sober-sides Herbie! Still with your nose to the grindstone. Wake up, man. Start living."

His tone was jovial but edged with contempt. The years dropped away and with them my diginity, my capacity to withstand Joe's mixture of cajolery and bullying.

I reviewed my appointments. There was nothing that could not be postponed or handled by my secretary. But it was the girl who hastened my decision. Her appealing eyes seemed to await my answer with breathless expectation. Her sweet sorrowing face and trembling lips held the promise of adventure, romance, the renewal of my own youthful passion.

I dared not return to the office for fear of being entrapped in a business conference. Instead I telephoned from the corner drugstore cancelling all appointments. Then I was in the back seat of the convertible. Wendy was at the wheel. She shot away from the curb with a roar and a jerking movement that sent me sprawling against the girl beside me. Linda did not seem to mind. She clasped my hand and held it tightly.

At first we crawled through traffic, jolting to stops at intersections. I felt conspicuous surrounded by trucks and cabs, the all-seeing eyes of the bus riders viewing me from their places of eminence. I wondered sheepishly if my departure had been witnessed by any of my office staff or if, even now, I was under observation of one of Bernice's friends. I moved farther away from Linda, drew myself erect and stared straight ahead. But our trailing hands still met on the white leather seat.

Then we were on a broad highway. The air fine, clean and crisp. On either side of the road was a sweep of green grass and a stand of trees. Dance music floated back from the dashboard radio. I relaxed, edged toward Linda and put my arm about her.

Joe swiveled in his seat, gave me a broad wink and a leer then ostentatiously turned his attention to Wendy.

We drove until dusk and then stopped at an outdoor restaurant where we ate at rough wooden tables set beneath spreading branches. We had cocktails and lobster thermidor and I ordered champagne. I was stuck with the bill, of course. But I did not care. Tonight I was no longer a stodgy business man, I was young and witty and gay. Every sally of mine was answered by the tinkling laughter of the girls and Joe Coburn's roar of approval. Linda's adoring eyes seldom left me. Even Wendy's

fingers brushed the back of my hand from time to time and I felt the warm length of her thigh as she slid close to me.

Joe swept back the tablecloth. Anger flickered in his eyes but it passed quickly. He whooped with glee.

"Herbie, you sly old dog! What have you got that makes the dames crawl all over you?"

I was the lion of the party and, if some inward voice of cynicism warned me that it was my stuffed wallet that made me so, I deafened my ears to the admonition.

Just as we were leaving I had a flurry of panic. A clock above the cashier's desk told me the hour and brought a swift memory of my agreement to take Bernice out to dinner. Already the time for my return home was long past. I had a vision of Bernice pacing the floor, uncertain as to whether to be worried or angry over my failure to appear.

I excused myself and hurried to a phone. Joe noted my consternation and followed me.

"What's the matter, Herbie? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"It's Bernice. She was expecting me."

"The old ball and chain, huh Herbie? You let her lead you around on a leash. You know something? She wouldn't be such a cold one if you roughed her up now and then."

The withering contempt again. Perhaps it was his mention of a leash that did it. For suddenly anger drained the blood from my face.

Joe was quick to sense my mood. He was instantly apologetic, pouring on the honey.

"Don't get me wrong, Herbie. All I mean is you're the life of the party. Things are really beginning to swing. So don't let us down."

I shrugged and called Bernice. I had expected to hear brittle anger in her voice but, when I finished my foolish explanation, her tones were languid with a hint of relief at being released from the onerous burden of my company.

"It doesn't matter, Herbert. I've had a hard day and I'm exhausted. I'll be glad to get to bed early and have a long night's rest."

"I'll cut loose as soon as I can."

"No, Herbert. Please. Enjoy yourself. Have a good time."

Before I could answer there was a click and the line went dead.

When I stepped out of the booth my knees buckled a little and my step was uncertain. I was usually an abstemious man and the unaccustomed cocktails and champagne were taking their toll.

The two girls swarmed over

me, laughing. They shimmered in front of my eyes but I laughed too. At least I was unsteady from drink and not from age. Linda and I landed in a tangle on the back seat. But now my inhibitions were dissipated. I clutched her close and she nestled her head against my shoulder, warm and cuddly as a kitten.

I have little memory of the ride except that we stopped at a package store where I bought vast quantities of a variety of liquors. Then we were somewhere in Long Island. A small house. Scarcely more than a cottage. Approached by a winding tree-lined drive that assured privacy. There was a fireplace. A tiled patio. A miniature swimming pool.

Joe busied himself mixing cocktails. We sat around drinking, the four of us. Then Wendy and Joe drifted away. I did not see them go and I was incurious as to their destination. All that mattered was that I was alone with the slender lovely girl who was Linda Storrow.

She was bending over a table, looking down at the melting ice cubes in a golden bowl. I went to her, standing behind her. My arms slid around her waist, holding her tight. She leaned against me and her face tilted back showing the long delicate arch of her throat. Our lips met. Hers were soft and pliant against mine. Her body grew taut and I could feel the throb of her nerves and hear the ragged intake of her breath.

I led her to a rattan divan and tried to pull her down beside me. But she slipped out of my arms and slid in a graceful mound at my feet. Her face rested against my knee and she began to sob.

I patted her bare shoulder in what was meant to be a paternal gesture.

She raised her wistful tear-stained face. "Herbie, you've been wonderful. But you mustn't love me. I'm a Jonah. Whenever a man loves me, something terrible happens to him."

"Nonsense," I said half-heartedly.

"It's not nonsense," she answered at last. "Listen to me."

She poured out her story. She was not a teenager as I had first supposed but twenty-six and twice widowed. Her first husband had committed suicide. The second had been stabbed to death in a barroom brawl by a young tough who had made improper advances to her.

I scarcely listened. I held her damp face in my hands and covered it with kisses. Of one thing I felt certain. This was no girl such as the others whom I had met through Joe Coburn. She was no one night stand. There would be no lost weekend. From now on Linda and I

would be together for good.

It was 3 A.M. when she drove me back to my apartment in the white Buick. I kissed her a fervent goodnight, heedless of the scrupulously evasive gaze of the doorman and the possibility of curious eyes staring from the seemingly lifeless windows.

The apartment was in darkness except for the night light in the foyer. I was grateful for that. I could not have faced Bernice. I stumbled to my room and undressed hurriedly, strewing my clothing about carelessly contrary to my customary orderliness. Then, just as I was about to get into bed, my foot tangled with the cord of a lamp. It crashed to the floor, splintering into a hundred pieces.

Moments later I heard Bernice stirring in the room beyond. I flung myself on the bed. She opened the door and was silhouetted against an oblong of pale light.

I closed my eyes and feigned sleep. I heard her whisper my name, then the barely audible susurration of her slippers as she approached the bed. She stood looking down at me.

I wondered if she could smell the cloying scent of Linda's perfume above the odor of whiskey; if in the dimness she could see the smear of lipstick on my face.

I did not know how long she stood there. Nor did I care. Already I had dismissed her from my thoughts. From now on, I assured myself, all my dreams and all my plans would revolve around Linda.

The days rushed breathlessly by. I was in love. Not the sustained, reasoned love of middle age but the wild delirium of youth. I was an adolescent, counting the hours, the minutes, the seconds that separated me from the object of my adoration.

Each time that I saw Linda my love was rekindled. I showered her with gifts. I swore my deathless passion in couplets, odes and endless love letters.

She rented an apartment on a side street within a short distance of my office. Like a guilty schoolboy I would sneak away from my work to spend a few minutes with her. If she were not there, I would pace up and down, fretting, wringing my hands, imagining all sorts of calamities that could have befallen her.

When she arrived I would seize her in my arms as though I would never let her go. I would cover her face, her lips, her hands with kisses. She was youth. Soft, pliant youth. In possessing her I regained all the wild dreams, the romance, the passion which I had thought I had set aside forever.

Sometimes she would mock at me.

"Herbie, you can't love me that much."

"But I do, my daring. I'll never let you go."

"Pretty soon you'll have to. We can't go on like this much longer."

I could feel hysteria mounting within me. "I can't live without you, Linda. I'd rather die than be parted."

"Don't be silly, darling. Do you think I want to play second fiddle forever. You're still married to Bernice and you say she won't give you a divorce. So be sensible, dear. In a little while we'll each go our own way."

"No," I screamed. "I want to marry you. I'll get rid of Bernice somehow."

She laughed. "How'll you go about it, Herbie?"

"I don't know but I'll find a way. I'll kill her if I have to."

The words had come out without thought, the explosive reaction to a moment of stress. But now they hung suspended in the air like symbols of death. Murder. The idea must have lain at the edge of my mind for a long time.

I looked at my hands. They were shaking. My gaze raised to Linda She was completely still, her eyes wide and fascinated, her mouth a moist pink circle.

She said, "Herbie! You mustn't even dream of such a thing."

Yet I sensed that there was no revulsion in her. No sense of shock. Instead she was titillated, and she came into my arms with a wild abandon she had never displayed before.

To this day I do not know if I ever seriously intended to murder my wife or if I was merely toying with the notion, playing some macabre game, thrilling to an imaginary danger.

The idea of killing Bernice was madness. I told myself this a thousand times. But always there was a voice that argued back, citing the statistics of unsolved homicides, estimating the proportion of slayings that were passed off as accidents or suicides. Surely I was intelligent enough to join this elite group of unsuspected murderers.

Then I would marshal my defenses against temptation. When a man's wife is slain, he is the logical suspect. This would be triply so in my case. I had been so besotten with love that I had made no attempt to cover my trail as far as Linda was concerned. Scores of people had seen us together. In a matter of hours our affair would be revealed to the police. Bernice had been outspoken in her opposition to divorce. That would be established too. Moreover there was the matter of money. She was wealthy, actually owning most of the advertising agency, while I had only my

salary. With her death, her shares would revert to me. Against such powerful motives who would doubt my guilt if she were killed?

I had all but discarded my homicidal venture when Linda handed me her ultimatum. Either I must offer her some concrete plan for marriage or she would leave me.

"You're a coward," she said. "You're afraid of Bernice. Afraid to demand a divorce or —" She let the words trail off but I knew what lay uppermost in her thoughts.

"Give me time," I pleaded.

"Two weeks, Herbie. That's all. It's got to be settled by then, one way or the other."

There was only one way out of my dilemma. A murder that appeared to be an accident. I prowled the apartment in Bernice's absence, seeking inspiration. The medicine cabinet looked like the best hope but it was almost bare. Bernice had a Spartan streak in her which made her ban most drugs. The few bottles were harmless. Aspirins. Bicarbonate of soda. Saccharin.

A fall from a window? Impossible. The sills were high, lined with flower boxes filled with geraniums, coleus and begonias.

An electric shock? It was a possibility. But I had no idea how to rig the wires. I was more likely to electrocute myself.

A memory stirred within me of a story I had once read in which a man killed his wife by dropping a radio into her tub while she bathed. But somehow I could not convince myself that a radio was a lethal weapon. Besides I had Bernice's modesty with which to contend. She invariably locked the door of the bathroom during her ablutions.

I instituted a careful search of Bernice's quarters. I do not know exactly what I was seeking. Perhaps a container of sleeping tablets secreted beneath her clothing, a piece of faulty electrical equipment or something that would suggest a booby trap. Until then I had not realized how little I had learned of my wife in twenty-five years of marriage. I had rarely been in her bedroom during the daytime. There was something forbidden, taboo and vaguely exciting in viewing the neat stacks of underclothing in her bureau, the stockings, the lines of shoes, the unfamiliar dresses in her closet. The subtle scent of her perfume was everywhere.

In the early stages of these surreptitious sorties I was constantly alert, on guard against surprise from either Bernice or Ernestine. But gradually it occurred to me that it was odd that my wife was so rarely at home. Almost invariably I re-

turned to an empty apartment. Or, if Bernice were there, she would be dressed to go out. She would greet me with the chastest of kisses so as not to disturb her lipstick and tell me that she must "run" for this appointment or that.

I would watch her go. Her jet black hair perfectly coiffed. Her fine-boned aristocratic face so artfully made up that it still appeared youthful. She had put on weight recently but I found the effect attractive. Her full breasts emphasized her trim waist, the swelling of her hips and her long shapely legs. She had a lush beauty that put Linda's prettiness to shame. But of what use was a cold unresponsive wife whose door remained locked throughout the night?

Sometimes I speculated as to whether she was aware of my affair with Linda. Lord knows I had taken few enough pains to conceal it. There were my many unexplained absences in the evening. My return late at night with the smell of liquor on my breath and the lingering odor of jasmin on my lapels.

Perhaps I was subconsciously courting disclosure, hoping that she would confront me with my duplicity and that, in her hurt pride, she would demand a divorce. After all, was that not what I wanted? But I had seen no signs of dejection in Bernice. To the contrary she seemed happier than usual. There was a sparkle to her eyes and a briskness to her walk that were unfamiliar.

The suspicion that Bernice was having a love affair was slow in coming to me and at first I was inclined to dismiss the notion as preposterous. Infidelity was simply out of keeping with her character. But once the idea had taken root, it flourished. A score of trifling incidents assumed new perspective.

Perhaps she had not noticed my absences from home because they synchronized with her own. Perhaps when I had tiptoed past her door late at night so as not to waken her, her bed had been empty.

Memories flooded in. The telephone call that had interrupted my search of the medicine cabinet. When I had answered there had been a gasp, a moment of silence, the quick click of the disconnect. There were the dark red roses which made their daily appearance on her bedside table. She had always professed an aversion to cut flowers. Certainly she would not have purchased them herself. Then there was her recent interest in the mail to which, in the past, she had always been indifferent.

My misgivings sent me scurrying back to her bedroom to pull out drawers already searched, to re-examine her jewel box,

her dresser. In a corner stood a lacquered Oriental chest. My eyes, rendered more acute by jealousy, discerned a thin line at the bottom. A secret drawer. I jerked it open and found proof that my suspicions were justified. In it lay a thin sheaf of letters.

I ripped open the fine white linen envelopes and read the letters one by one. They were stupid, inane love letters, each beginning, "My adored one," each swearing eternal devotion. There were poems, scarcely better than bits of doggerel. Veiled hints of illicit passion.

My hands were shaking so that the crisp white paper crackled beneath them. I sought for a clue to their author. The letters were typed, the only signature a "J." At the foot of each epistle was a smear of lipstick as though Bernice had pressed it to her mouth in a wanton, yearning kiss.

I felt revolted, nauseated and yet, even then, I sensed something familiar about the letters. The realization as to why this should be so came more slowly. They were not unlike my letters to Linda. "J"'s passion paralleled my own.

Only when I had finished the letters did I notice the other objects in the drawer. They were mementoes of love. A gardenia, turned brown with age. The stubs of theatre tickets. Bits of ribbon. A silver cigarette lighter embossed with the letter "J".

I fingered them over and then I saw the last object pushed to the back of the drawer. A medicine bottle filled with dark brown tablets. Around the bottle held by an elastic band, was a newspaper clipping. I peeled it off and examined the label: VAXOL. Underneath, in smaller letters, was printed: A non-prescription drug to ease stomach distress and digestive disorders.

I unfolded the clipping. The headlines stared up at me.

CITY EMBARGOES LETHAL STOMACH REMEDY

CARBOLIC ACID FOUND IN ONE BATCH OF VAXOL

I read on:

> The discovery of a lethal quantity of carbolic acid in one lot of a patent medicine used in the treatment of indigestion and stomach ulcers led yesterday to an embargo of that item by the New York City Health Department.
>
> Julian K. Seibert, acting Health Commissioner, said that the contamination found in a single tablet of Vaxol, Lot No. 647413, was sufficient to cause acute illness and warned that the continued use or a heavy dosage of the drug could cause death.

I checked the lot number in the left hand corner of the label. The digits were the same.

My first thought was that I held in my hands the instru-

ment of death for which I had been seeking so long.

Then the true purport of my find struck me. Why should Bernice have in her possession a bottle of Vaxol? It was I who suffered from the occupational disease of the advertising trade, stomach ulcers.

But strangely it was not anger that consumed me now. It was a raging fuming jealousy.

Bernice who had always been so cold throughout our marriage, who had been so exactingly correct, who had made a fetish of modesty, had proven herself a wanton with another man. And now a new vision of Bernice came to me. Beneath her porcelain - smooth, masklike beauty lurked a wild lawless passion. Her full-breasted, narrow-waisted body was meant for love. Yet I had never experienced that fire. Was her restraint a reaction to my own timid approach?

Suddenly I was overcome by a tremulous craving for the wife I had never known, the voluptuous woman who had given herself to my unknown rival.

I fell on my knees before the chest, my breath catching. With the utmost care I retied the orchid ribbon about the letters. The other mementoes I thrust back into the drawer. The bottle of Vaxol was pushed back into its original position.

I returned to the front room and slumped into an easy chair, dazed by the revelations of my wife's true character. I turned out the light and sat in the darkness. I was still there when Bernice came in an hour or so later.

She stepped into the room and flicked on the reading light. She did not see me at first and turned to preen before the mirror. From where I sat I could see her reflection. Deep shadows darkened her eyes, gave them a mysterious quality. The color of her lips was blood red. Her skin had an alabaster sheen. Her movements were slow, gracefully lazy, as are those of a woman sated with passion.

I cleared my throat. She spun around with a sharp little cry, the back of her hand flying to her mouth. Her expression could have been fear, or it could have been guilt.

She pulled herself together quickly, her voice as controlled as ever.

"Why, darling, how you alarmed me! Whatever were you doing there in the dark?"

She came to me, a frown crinkling her smooth white forehead.

Now was the moment to act, to confront her with my knowledge of her infidelity, her murderous intent. While I had been waiting I had raced through a dozen dramatic scenes in my mind. I had raged and ranted. I had beaten her until she beg-

ged for pity. Then I had declared my own burning passion. There had been a reconciliation, an ecstatic reunion such as shared by long separated lovers.

But in her presence the force of habit was too strong to break.

I mumbled something about being tired, not feeling well.

"Poor darling," she said sympathetically. "It must be your stomach ulcers again. Do let me fix you something. Some hot beef tea perhaps. The doctor recommended it."

I shuddered. Beef tea. The little brown bottle of Vaxol. I could picture myself collapsing. Bernice carefully setting the stage. The medicine bottle close to my hand. Who would doubt that I had taken the tablets voluntarily?

My eyes raised to hers. A look of anxiety showed on her face. Not for me, I thought. But for fear I would reject her offer.

She said coaxingly, "It will be good for you, Herbert. I'm sure it will. Now don't argue. I'll get it right away."

But she did not go directly to the kitchen. She stopped in her bedroom on the way. I listened carefully but could hear no sound. Was she kneeling by the chest? Pouring the round brown pellets into her hand? Speculating as to how many would compose a lethal dose?

She passed on to the kitchen and I could hear the clatter of a pan. Then she was back with an oversized cup.

"Drink it, darling. You'll feel better. I know you will."

I stared down at the steaming fluid. Certainly the bouillon cubes could not have colored it such a deep rich brown.

I staggered to my feet. "I'll take it with me," I said. "I'll drink it in bed."

"Oh no, you should have it hot."

Without answering I carried the cup and saucer to my room. I thought of pouring out a sample and taking it to a chemist for analysis the next day. I thought of writing a note accusing Bernice and her lover of my death and then draining the cup. But in the end I dumped the beef tea into the toilet and flushed it down.

I stripped, put on my pajamas and lay down. But sleep was beyond me. Once I went to Bernice's door but it was locked as usual. My knuckled hand rose to beat on the panel but stopped in mid-motion. I had an almost pathological fear of scenes and I knew how Bernice would interpret my intrusion.

I tossed and turned throughout the night, alternately damning Bernice for her betrayal and scourging myself for my adolescent affair with Linda. Toward morning I was exhausted and drowsed fitfully.

I arose late, determined to lay

my cards on the table, to make a clean breast of my relationship with Linda, to beseech Bernice to abandon her lover.

My plans went for naught. Bernice had already left the apartment and Ernestine informed me that she would not return until late that night. Ernestine placed my breakfast before me but I could not eat. The toast and scrambled eggs were like sawdust in my mouth. I sipped the coffee, then let the cup clatter back in its saucer. Could Bernice have doctored it with Vaxol before her departure?

The day was an endless torture. By mid-afternoon I had phoned the apartment a dozen times. It was Ernestine's half-day off and the dial tone hummed on and on like a maddening buzz-saw.

Not until the office closed did I think of Linda. My call to her went unanswered too but belatedly I remembered that we had a dinner engagement. It would be better to keep it than to endure the lonely vigil ahead without companionship.

The intervening hours I spent in a bar, doggedly trying to dull the sharp pangs of my corrosive jealousy with drink.

We had agreed to meet in the Havana-Madrid Hotel. Linda was late as usual. I fumed inwardly as I smoked cigarette after cigarette, snuffing each out when it was half-burned. Then she came tripping across the lobby, looking younger, more doll-like than ever. She wore a too tight yellow suit with a short wide skirt and her blonde hair was fluffed up in a bee-hive. The wan, unhappy look that had once appealed to my chivalry was replaced by a pink flush of excitement.

She linked her arm in mine as we walked to the dining room. She tottered on spiked-heel shoes, throwing her warm youthful body against me repeatedly. But for once I had no pleasant reactions. I was suddenly conscious of how we must appear to others, a grayhaired sugar daddy ensnared by the wiles of a shoddy siren.

I ordered caviar and champagne, roast duckling with wild rice, all the things that Linda liked best. She chattered about the afternoon's shopping expedition, her hands animated, her words tumbling over one another. She stopped only to eat, to pout, to ogle a passing waiter.

I listened to her rapid chit-chat, bored as I had never been before. I fought the impulse to get up, leave and never return. How could I ever have been enamored with this chit of a girl with her baby blue eyes, her vacuous face, her empty mind?

Where was Bernice tonight? Was she enjoying dinner in some secret hideaway with the myste-

rious "J". I pictured her face with its elaborate planes, her eyes sparkling, the swell of her full breasts beneath her high-necked gown.

But no picture would form of her companion. "J" was a faceless masculine figure, the man who should have been myself.

How could I have ever dreamed of killing Bernice when she alone was the woman I wanted? Toward the end of the meal I excused myself and rushed to a phone booth. Still no answer. But I clung on in desperation, in the futile hope of hearing my wife's voice.

When I returned to the table Linda had her compact out, dabbing messily at lips already too brightly colored. I glared at her with something close to hate but she was impervious to my moods.

"What'll we do tonight, Herbie?"

"We'll go to your place. I want to talk with you."

"Oh, Herbie! You sound so grim." Her voice dropped to a conspirational whisper. "You haven't done anything about Bernice, have you?"

"No, and I'm not going to, Linda. It's time for a showdown."

Her guileless round blue eyes narrowed into slits; her pouting lips took on lines of stubborn sulkiness. But all she said was, "I think you're right, Herbie."

We taxied to her place in silence. After all her threats to leave me, I had assumed she would accept the breaking of our relationship with equanimity. I could not have been more wrong.

Back in her apartment I announced my decision as dispassionately as possible. Her first response was a torrent of tears. She literally threw herself at my feet and clutched my legs.

I stood in awkward captivity, unable to move without stepping on her. But I was unrelenting, stiffl maintaining my position. She snatched at my hands, covering them with kisses, while I tried to pull away.

"You can't leave me, Herbie. Not to go back to her."

"I have to, Linda. After all she's my wife."

"But you don't love her. It's me you love. How many times have you told me so."

I made a rapid calculation. "Around a thousand, I should imagine. But things are different now. I'll make a settlement, Linda. A good one."

She released me and sprang to her feet. "I'll settle for marriage, Herbie Basset. Nothing else. That's what you promised me and that's what I'll get."

Her face was white, her nostrils pinched, her voice shrill.

I tried to speak calmly. "I'll never marry you, Linda."

"Oh yes, you will. Because I know you were plotting to kill Bernice. I'll go to her. I'll go to the police. I'll ruin you."

Sweat was beading my forehead and running in trickles down my cheeks. A cold chill crept along my spine. But I tried to put on a bold front.

"Do what you like. I'll never submit to blackmail. We're through, Linda. I can't say it more clearly. This is the end."

Then she was on me. Her fingers, with their long sharp nails like the claws of a cat, raked my face. I raised my arms to protect myself and her knee thudded into my groin. I doubled over in agony. She picked up a soapstone bookend and crashed it against my jaw. I stumbled back, tripped and fell. She flung herself on me, ripping my shirt at the collar, flailing, clawing and biting, all the time shrieking abuse.

I bulled my way to my feet and pinioned her wrists but she writhed and twisted in my grip. Her spiked heels drummed against my legs and her screams were like a fire siren.

I had never struck a woman in my life but now my hand came up in a hard slap that sent her reeling away from me. She collapsed on the sofa.

I fled. But even as I neared the door, I could see her racing toward me. She held an elaborate Japanese vase, raised high as though to strike. Outside there was a thunderous knocking on the door and a stentorian voice shouted, "Hey, what's going on in there?"

I wrenched the door open and collided with a man in shirtsleeves who tried to hold me. I wrestled him aside and headed for the stairs. I was halfway down the flight when the vase hit me. It was a solid blow, directly on the top of my head. The shards showered around me, slicing into the skin of my scalp. I sprawled forward, caught the railing and managed to right myself.

Linda was leaning over the bannister, screaching vituperation. All up and down the corridors doors were opening. Curious faces stared at me. Curious voices raised questions.

I straightened up, trying to bear these indignities with composure.

An old lady waggled a finger at me and cried, "For shame."

A piece of crockery sailed down from above, missing me by a hairbreadth and shattering against the wall. Linda's screams changed to hysterical laughter.

I had visions of a mob following me, of being arrested and hustled to jail. But once on the sidewalk I was alone.

A cab was cruising past. I hailed it and trotted toward it. The driver looked at my battered condition and said doubtfully,

"I don't want no cop trouble. Are you on the lam or something?"

But already I had the door open and had slipped into the comforting obscurity of the back seat.

I gave him my address and handed him a ten dollar bill. He fingered the money, shook his head and jerked the cab into gear.

The doorman stared at me incredulously as I stumbled out of the taxi. He rushed forward to give me a helping hand. Outwardly he was solicitious but I sensed derision beneath his ingratiating concern. I brushed him aside and strode to the self-service elevator. Fortunately the cage was empty and I had a little time to pull myself together before reaching my floor.

I was not prepared to find Bernice at home. The evening was still young and I had taken it for granted she would linger with her lover. But, when I opened the door, I saw a light in the front room. Bernice was curled on a love seat. The dim glow of a lamp glistened on her burnished hair and gave a luster to her velvet gown of dark rose, which clung seductively to her ripe body. A dozen fresh roses were in a bowl beside her and she was holding a sheet of crisp white stationery in her hand. Another letter from her lover no doubt.

She looked up, her eyes startled, and her hand darted behind her, concealing the letter beneath a miniature pillow. The crackle of the paper sounded unnaturally loud in the silence of the room.

I was unable to move or take my eyes from her. This was Bernice, my wife, and I had no doubt that earlier that evening she had lain in passionate embrace with my unknown rival.

I lurched forward and knelt at her feet. My words came babbling out, a mixture of contrition, passionate love, jealousy, censure and pleas to keep our marriage intact. I cannot remember the words and, if I did, I would be ashamed to repeat them.

When I was finished she said coldly, "Whatever are you yammering about, darling? You must be drunk."

"You have a lover," I accused.

"Nonsense, Herbert. You know I'm too old and too respectable for that."

"Who is 'J'?" I bellowed.

"'J'? There is no 'J'."

"The love letters. The bottle of Vaxol. You planned to kill me."

"Oh Herbert, darling! Please don't be so melodramatic!"

I raged and stormed and swore eternal devotion and all the time she watched me, scarcely stirring, the suggestion of a quizzical smile on her lips.

And then when I had exhausted myself, when my voice was no more than a harsh croak and I was on the verge of tears, she told me the truth with her customary devastating candor.

She had known about Linda all along and at first she had not cared. But, as reports of my doltish behavior kept coming in, she grew increasingly embarrassed.

"Darling," she chided, "you might have been more circumspect. You didn't need to flaunt the girl all over the place. And you did show such poor taste. I mean she really was on the cheap side."

I nodded miserably and rubbed my bruised jaw.

"And then you took to acting so strangely, Herbert. Prowling my room. Fumbling around in my possessions. And sometimes you'd look at me as though you loathed me and wished I were dead. Frankly I didn't know what to do. After all, our marriage has been convenient and I must say you were never demanding so I couldn't complain about your having a fling. But I couldn't have this little strumpet breaking up our home. So I went to Jeannie Simmons with my problem. You remember Jeannie, don't you? She used to edit a column for the lovelorn."

Again I nodded.

"Jeannie said I should make you jealous, darling. I tried. I went to beauty parlors and bought new dresses and alluring perfumes but you were so bemused with Linda that you looked right through me as though I weren't there. So Jeannie suggested writing the letters and planting them where you'd be sure to find them."

"Who wrote them?"

"To tell the truth, you did, Herbert. I found some silly old love letters you sent me when we were engaged. Of course the stationery had turned yellow and I had to type them up and change the wording a little. They really were too nawkish, dear. And then I put a 'J' at the end instead of the 'H', the way you used to sign them. If the 'J' stood for anything, I guess it was Jeannie because she gave me the idea."

"And the poison medicine?"

"Oh it wasn't really poison, dear. Jeannie happened to have a bottle of Vaxol her ex-husband used. It was empty and the code number on the bottom was different. So we filled it up with vegetable-vitamin tablets, soaked off the label, typed in the number of the poisoned lot, and glued it back on again. Jeannie said if I gave you a scare it might bring you to your senses."

I still wasn't convinced, although I remembered the vaguely familiar ring of the letters. I went to her room, jerked open the bottom drawer of the chest

and scooped up the envelopes and the brown bottle. She was right, the numbers had been tampered with. It was clear enough once one suspected the trick. I extracted a letter from the sheaf and took it to the typewriter. I fingered out a few lines and compared the type. There was no room for doubt. The Y was out of kilter. The o partially blocked in. Yet I could not accept as fact that my wife's paramour was a chimera and I the victim of an elaborate hoax.

I consoled myself with the belief that my love for Bernice, the passion she had engendered, was genuine. I looked at her across the shadowed room. In the dim light she was beautiful.

I went to her and stood above her. At the back of my mind still clung the nebulous belief that she had known a lover, that some man had broken through the cold wall of her indifference and awakened in her a passionate response. And if another could do it, so could I.

I reached for her wrists and tried to pull her against me. She resisted and her flesh was dry and cool. I tumbled down beside her, clutching her wildly, trying to kiss her lips but she twisted free.

"Stop mauling me, Herbert. You know how I hate to be messed up."

"There must be a lover," I shouted. "Why else should you draw away from me?"

"Don't be a fool. We're old. Both of us. We're not meant for love."

As she spoke, she reached for the lamp and turned on a brighter bulb.

The naked light struck across her face with a cruel glare. Her eyes were hollow now, sunk deep in their wrinkled sockets. Her pancake make-up was cracked, revealing her withered skin. Her lips were a colorless line beneath her heavy lipstick. The rose gown fell away, revealing her corded neck, her flaccid breasts, the shapelessness of her uncorseted body.

I caught sight of my own face in a mirror. A pompous face with jutting jowls and square teeth. I was no romantic figure. Linda's only interest in me had been my money. I was a broken-down mountebank, an over-aged satyr, a buffoon.

My shoulders slumped and I had to fight the tears welling in my eyes. My gaze returned to Bernice. She had stripped me of my illusions, made me see myself for what I really was. I hated this woman who was my wife because she had deceived me. Not by taking a lover. But by pretending that she had.

She said brightly, "Don't be so dejected, Herbert. You look like a big shaggy dog that's been whipped. What did Linda do to cheer you up? Did she call

you Fido and make you sit up and beg before she'd throw you a bone?"

It was the first time in all our years together that Bernice had ever made an allusion to my canine appearance. It was also to be the last.

The roar of my own voice almost deafened me. "No one dares call me Fido."

Bernice laughed then. Her laughter was as cool as the tinkle of ice cubes, as sharp as the splintering of glass.

My hands stretched out to still the laughter. I saw my spatulate fingers curl around her throat. I tried to pull them away but it was as though they had a will of their own, pressing deeper and deeper into the cool lifeless flesh.

She had screamed once. A scream filled with terror that had ripped through the night. Then her head had snapped back and she was silent. But still I could not let her go.

I was holding her limp body when the police broke in the door. They pried my fingers loose and wrestled me into a chair. I collapsed and cradled my face in my death-giving hands.

I think I must have blacked out then for I have only a confused memory of the hours that followed.

The next thing I remember clearly I was in a room in a precinct house. A bare oblong with cracked walls of a nauseous shade of green. A light from an overhanging bulb fell full upon me. The other figures in the room were scarcely visible.

A hand slapped the love letters on the table, the bottle of Vaxol.

A voice grated, "Make it easy for yourself, Basset. Come clean and tell us the whole story. Maybe you had reason to kill her. Maybe you can cop a plea."

I stared into the dimness beyond the circle of light. There were three men there. Two in plain clothes. One in uniform, an open notebook in his hands.

Their faces were masked in shadow but somehow I felt the need to make them understand.

"She deceived me," I said.

"Sure we know. The letters were there. You killed her out of jealousy. Ain't that right, Basset?"

"No. It wasn't like that. It was a trick. She deceived me into thinking she had a lover, when no man would want her."

"I don't get it, Basset. Spell it out."

I tried. But how could I make them understand. She had shown me in a single instant the drab gray world that lay ahead. The monotony that stretched on forever. And then the final epithet of her contempt. That much I managed to

hold back.

The man who was questioning me scratched his head. "You mean there was no lover? That you knew it and killed her all the same? Even though she was just pulling your leg,"

"It was a practical joke," I said.

Unexpectedly the man guffawed and, behind him, one of the others snickered.

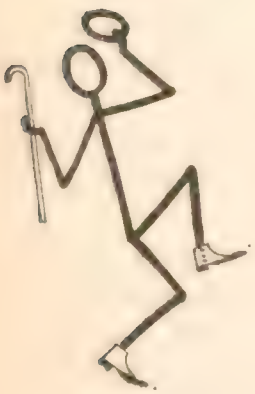
Then the whole room seemed to explode with laughter.

There were only three of them but it seemed to me that they formed a vast circle of laughing, jeering faces. A thousand fingers seemed to point at me in mockery.

Everyone was laughing except myself.

As I have said before, I have no sense of humor.

NEXT MONTH —



THE GOLDEN BIRD OF MALLORY
by **E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM**

THE CASE OF THE COMMON COLD
by **CRAIG RICE**

MERCY KILLING
by **MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD**

SAM RALL'S PRIVATE GHOST
by **BRUNO FISCHER**

VENDETTA FOR THE SAINT
(Part III)
by **LESLIE CHARTERIS**

THE RIDDLE OF THE BLACK SPADE
A New Hildegarde Withers story by STUART PALMER

—in the March 1964 issue, **THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE**

sometimes the blind

by Nicholas Blake

They talk about all the unsolved crimes. People don't realize how many cases the police know who the criminal is, but can't collect enough evidence to prosecute — because they, you, the dear old British Public, are too windy to come forward as witnesses, or too blind to have seen something that was happening under their noses . . .

Our train was delayed by fog that morning, and crowded worse than ever; the guard had even let some passengers travel in his van.

We traced these later, but not one of them had noticed someone poisoning the blind man's dog in the van — they thought it had gone to sleep.

I'd seen the blind man often at the terminus — being helped out by the guard and a tall, fair chap, and putting the harness on his dog. Today the three of them stood on the platform, at a loss, while the commuters jostled past, sheep making for a gate.

"Nicholas Blake", the distinguished British mystery writer, is the author of WIDOW'S CRUISE, END OF CHAPTER, WHISPER IN THE GLOOM, PENKNIFE IN MY HEART and other novels. A distinguished poet and essayist, Professor of Poetry at Oxford 1951-'56, *he was created C.B.E. in* 1950.

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A cynical friend of mine, walking along that platform with me once in the rush-hour, remarked, "The human race seems to be divided into men, women and office workers."

Well, I'm one of the latter myself: I have an office in New Scotland Yard. So I had to do something about the dead dog — names, addresses, the usual caper. Finally, the blind man, a pasty-faced fellow of 30 called Arthur Lightly, was led away by his tall companion, James Smith. They were cousins, lived in the same street over Bromley way.

When I came out of the station a couple of minutes later, I saw a bus standing askew across the busy street, traffic piling up behind it.

I forced my way through the crowd. A body lay in the road, its head shattered, blood everywhere, and the British Public swarming round like blowflies.

Near me the blind man was calling out, "Jimmy! What's happened? Where are you, Jimmy?" James Smith was unable to answer, for it was he lying dead there.

The verdict at the inquest was Accidental Death, with the bus driver exonerated. The crowd from the station had, as usual, been playing Last Across, against the signals of the man on point duty.

Arthur Lightly said he'd been pushed by people behind him, stumbled against his cousin, and must have knocked him in front of the bus. The driver agreed this could have been how it happened.

The other witnesses might have been as blind as Arthur, for all the use they were; one of them said he'd heard a woman scream; "He tried to push him," while another had got the impression that the dead man was pulling the blind one across the path of the bus.

Well, there it was — till some nasty wrote us an anonymous letter to say that James Smith had been carrying on with Mrs. Lightly, and the baby would not be her husband's. We had to pay a bit of attention.

You see, James Smith had been a chemist, with access to the poison which killed the guide-dog. And Arthur's life was quite heavily insured. An "accident," crossing a busy street, would get James his cousin's wife and the money. You can't charge a dead man with attempted murder; but suppose Mrs. Lightly had been in the plot, too?

My Super sent me down to Bromley. Mrs. Lightly was a small woman, pretty but nervous; a schoolmistress.

"I'm sorry my husband is out," she said.

I had made sure he was.

"I'm glad he can get about again," I said.

"Oh, he has a new guide-dog. Though it'll never be quite the same as Peter, I'm afraid—his first one. He really loved Peter. They were quite inseparable. He wouldn't let anyone else feed him, even."

"He must miss his cousin very much. Shocking business."

"We both do. But I'm hoping the baby will make up to him for it. Of course, poor Jimmy was devoted to Arthur. He used to take him for walks in the country and tell him all the things he could see; and to football matches and the dogs. Last month he showed Arthur his dispensary. Yes, Jimmy really tried so hard to be Arthur's eyes."

We chatted over cups of tea. The woman seemed to shed her nervousness as she got used to me. Could she be a guilty woman — this pretty, talkative straight-eyed creature? Well, the guilty sometimes show it by being garrulous, not warily on the defensive.

I learned that Arthur Lightly had lost his sight three years ago. He'd woken up one morning with blurred vision. They did not have a telephone then, so his cousin had offered to go for the doctor on his way to work. The doctor being out at a confinement, James had left a message.

Unfortunately, it was discovered that Arthur had a condition—detached retinas—which leads inevitably to blindness unless it is treated within a few hours. By the time they got him to an eye-surgeon, it was too late.

"Well, your husband has adapted himself marvellously," I said.

"Yes, hasn't he?" She smiled proudly. "They've taken him back at the office: not charity —lots of jobs he can do. Why, he gets—he used to get quite annoyed with Jimmy pointing everything out. You develop an extraordinary sense of hearing when you're blind: as if you could see through your ears, almost."

That's a thing we have to learn in the CID, too. You listen to a suspect's tone— his hesitations, evasions, fulsome agreements or protests. And the naturalness with which Mrs. Lightly talked about the dead man rang true. I could not believe she had had an affair with him, let alone been involved in a conspiracy against her husband's life.

"It *was* an accident, wasn't it? she asked presently, with a candid look.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Oh, Peter being poisoned—it was such a filthy thing to do—

a guide-dog."

We talked a bit longer. Then I rose to go. "By the way," I asked, "you said he wouldn't let anyone else feed him." Who wouldn't?"

"Why, Peter of course". She broke off, staring at me in consternation.

So the dog wouldn't let anyone but his master feed him. So it was Arthur who had given his dog the poisoned meat in the guard's van. So that Jimmy had to lead Arthur across the danger-out street. And Arthur's acute sense of hearing would tell him the exact moment to stage the "accident"—an accident which might well look as if it had been contrived by James himself, but killed the wrong person.

And why? Your cousin fails to get a doctor in time to save you from blindness.

Then he turns the knife in the wound by forever leading you around describing all the things he can see and you can't—even into the dispensary where the poisons are kept.

And I feel sure the nasty who wrote us that anonymous letter could not have resisted telephoning Arthur to say his wife was carrying on with his cousin.

Oh, Arthur had a basinful all right. Well, what would you have done in my place? Turned a blind eye? I'm a policeman, and not allowed to. We ferreted around for a bit, but never found enough evidence for the Director of Public Prosecutions to bring a case.

When I last visited the Lightlys, they were very cheerful. Arthur changed the baby's nappy with the deftest skill, while pretty Mrs. Lightly smiled at me over his head.

DRIVE ON MAFIA

More than four hundred people were arrested this summer in Italy's roundup of "suspected" Mafia members in Sicily. Leaders of the Sicilian underworld found themselves rubbing shoulders with the "soldiers" whom they'd normally only meet with at assignment time in the highly stratified society that is the Mafia.

These are in the main men who rely on fear — and on machine guns and dynamite.

And, just as in this country, they are business-minded. The Palermo fruit market is an example of this. Rival Mafia factions fought for control of this and men were shot dead in broad daylight in the market itself before "peace" descended on the fruit-stalls. The faction that won decided who would buy and sell in the market, and the prices that would be paid to them. As a result, the price of fruit in fruitgrowing Sicily is higher than elsewhere in the country.

the last birthday

by Dan Ross

It was a cold, gray dawn. Dysmas drew his robe about him and shivered slightly. Standing there on the high hill above Nazareth he wondered why he had succumbed to the strange urge that had set him out on this long walk. With the breaking of light he had started out on his lone pilgrimage after a night of restless, troubled slumber.

His penetrating glance ranged from the distant blue of the Mediterranean Sea to the Mountains of Lebanon with their snowy peaks. Above a solitary black bird flew strangely near for a moment with a haunting, hoarse cry. Then with a swooping movement it changed direction and vanished in the grayness with echoes of its eerie calling. And Dysmas remembered his reason for being there. It was his birthday.

The bronzed face with its short black beard and thin, hawk nose took on an ironic expression. Surely this was a day to celebrate, the birthday of a thief! For that was what he was. Dysmas, the robber! That was how most people referred to him.

Readers of this magazine will remember Charlotte and Dan Ross' sensitive THE THREE THIEVES (SMM, Febr. 1962). Mr. Ross turns once more to Biblical times with this story about one of those men who was to die, so soon afterwards, by His side. Dysmas is very much a product of the times. Most of those He knew, and to whom He preached, knew only poverty and hunger; "rulers" and the ruled alike, they all had memories—but no hope . . .

Even his own family had disowned him. He had become a solitary, surly outcast living on the outskirts of the city. There were none close to him except his wife, Rachel, and the children. Unless you counted Zachary, his companion in thievery.

Yet he had not always been an outcast. As a boy he had played in these hills with the other children of Nazareth of his own age. He had been no different from the others. That was long ago, he thought with a sigh, before the turning point. The fateful moment that had made him a thief, another playmate a merchant, and still another a fisherman. Fate had played its pranks with all the lives of the noisy, racing group of youngsters recalled in his mind's eye. Some had gone on to fame and riches, some to humdrum, drab lives, some to misfortune and disgrace.

He studied the long crouch of the Carmel ridge. That was where he differed from Zachary and the other thieves with whom he associated. He deeply felt the disgrace of his life and there were many times when he'd vowed to make a change. But always he had fallen back on his evil ways. The pressure had been too great and he had faced the reproachful eyes of Rachel with a hopeless shrug.

"No use," he'd said abruptly. "I have gone on this way too long. There's no turning back for me now."

Rachel of the subdued, prematurely faded beauty had continued to study him with a gentle expression: "There is always repentance."

Angrily he'd raised his voice: "Don't start quoting Him again! Your Teacher is mad! As a boy He was just an ordinary young roughneck like the rest of us. I once played in the hills with your Teacher. We were born on the same day!"

It was true. He'd discovered that long ago when they were boys. Before the quirk of fortune that had made him turn into a robber had made the Other Lad fancy Himself a divine Teacher. Had it been an evil star under which they were born that had brought them to these unhappy fates?

Old Sarah, the hag who lived near him and practiced foretelling the future in the sands, said this was the cause of his troubles. Surely it must also be the reason the Teacher had gone mad with His delusions of glory. There was no question that He was disliked and distrusted by the people of His hometown, Nazareth. And He had also returned to the city to be with His Mother on His birthday.

Zachary, the young thief who shared Dysmas' fortunes, had

thrown back his handsome blonde head and laughed as he announced to Rachel: "Your Teacher is back in Nazareth for His birthday. He'll be lucky if He gets out of the town alive. People are sick of all this babbling about miracles and healing.

Rachel had held the younger of their children, a girl of six, close to her and turned to Dysmas: "Perhaps this time we can present the child to Him!"

Dysmas had shaken his head sullenly. "No! Never! He is a madman I tell you! The child shall not go near Him." It infuriated him that she should believe enough in this madman to want to offer their child for healing. As if this Prophet could possibly lengthen the crippled leg she'd been born with.

Inwardly the truth of his anger was that he blamed himself for his little girl's affliction. Old Sarah the hag, had intoned that it was the mark of evil. He'd nearly choked her that time! But the thing had gnawed at him. It seemed likely that out of the darkness of his wrongdoing had come this maimed innocent.

And now he stood alone in this gray dawning thinking about all these things in his life. Hating most of all what he had done. Appalled at the uselessness of his existence. Yet there was something to live for. Rachel and the children depended on him for the miserable livelihood he offered. And they loved him. The thought was warming as he waited there alone, a frail figure against the cloudy sky.

After a while he began the long descent that led to the city. For him it would be no special day. Another day much like the others. After his morning meal he was to meet Zachary and make plans for a proposed raid on a rich merchant's warehouse in a nearby town. As he trudged down the hilly path he wondered what the Other One whose birthday this was would be doing. There were rumors He would speak in the synagogue. That could lead to trouble, lucky there were other followers along to lend some protection. Yes, Dysmas considered, we two must indeed have been born under a star of ill-fortune.

It was late afternoon when he and Zachary came by the synagogue. They stood quietly in the rear where they would not be observed and listened to the Teacher as He addressed the unruly crowd.

Dysmas listened to Him as He talked. He had become a handsome man with silky brown hair and beard and great, glowing brown eyes. There was a deep sincerity in His voice as He spoke against racial and religious intolerance and asked them

to put aside their prejudices.

"Show us your powers! Open the eyes of the blind, carpenter! Raise us up a corpse, Mary's son!" someone cried from the other side of the synagogue.

There was raucous laughter and the more threatening low rumble of voices in anger. Rows of scornful faces, full of hateful challenge, glared up at the slim figure before them.

He sighed: "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own home."

Zachary tugged at Dysmas' arm and they left the synagogue. Outside the blonde young man chuckled scornfully: "Things are not going too well for your boyhood friend, the Teacher! He'd do well to be on His way."

Dysmas stared ahead thoughtfully as they moved away. "There is no wrong in what He says. He offers hope for all."

Zachary glanced at him in surprise. "You're getting sentimental, my slippery one. Too much of that could land you in real trouble."

He didn't reply to the young man. They made a quick journey to the hills to visit a buyer of stolen goods. On their return they took a short cut that led away from the usual road and across rocky fields. They were close to the city again when the incident happened.

They were coming down a hill toward the road when Zachary silently clutched his arm and pointed to the figure ahead of them, carefully poised behind a huge ledge of rocks that must conceal him from the road and passers-by.

He was middle-aged and poorly dressed and as he crouched against the rocks the sun reflected against the long knife he held in an upraised hand. But this was only part of the tableaux the two robbers saw. For now coming up the road the Teacher appeared in His white robe walking slowly. Some distance behind Him were the men who called themselves followers. The Teacher's head was bent in contemplation and Dysmas noting a slight movement forward on the part of the man with the knife realized that in a moment he would dash from behind the rocks into the road to assassinate the Teacher.

Without further thought Dysmas pulled himself away from Zachary and ran down the hill to spring on the concealed assassin with a final, great leap. The assassin wheeled in surprise and they began a fierce struggle. Toppling to the ground they wrestled in a desperate battle for the knife. It was a soundless deadly contest of which the passers-by would be unaware.

The assassin tried again and again to wield his knife against

Dysmas but without success. Finally Dysmas twisted the hand that held it until the knife dropped loose and then he brought pressure of his own hands against the throat of the would-be assassin until he fell back unconscious.

Zachary bent forward and pulled him up off the prone figure. "That will do," the blonde man warned. "No need to murder him. I don't see why you had to interfere anyway. It was none of our business and we could get into trouble through this."

Dysmas stared at him as he regained his breath and said: "The Teacher was my friend. I could do nothing less."

Zachary shrugged angrily. "Let's get away from here."

Dysmas picked up the knife and slipped it under his robe. With a final glance at the still motionless assassin he followed Zachary. Now that the excitement was over it was hard to know just what had caused him to act as he had. Except that something about the Teacher in the synagogue had impressed him. Could Rachel be right about Him after all?

He was still in a strange mood as they began the walk homeward. And for this reason he persuaded Zachary to stop at the hovel of old Sarah, the fortune teller, with him.

Zachary sat by with a supercilious smile as the toothless crone bent over her dish of the sands of fortune and intoned a message to Dysmas.

"You do not have to tell me," she lifted a skinny hand, "I know that it is your birthday, Dysmas."

Dysmas exchanged an amused glance with his friend. "You do not need the sands of fortune to tell me that, crone. You were probably the midwife at my birth. You were for most of the young people of my time."

She gave a shrill cackle. "True!" And now she bent over the sands and pawed them with her emaciated claws. "I see strange things here," she intoned. "I see you in a struggle, there is a knife!" She studied the sands. "Ahead lie more perils and many, many gold pieces!" She nodded. "You will grow rich in the months ahead, my young friend!"

"That is old stuff," Zachary scoffed. "Can you not see more?"

And now the hag's face became wan and strained. Her voice a hoarse whisper as she added: "Yes, I see more. I see a hill, a great hill. There are crosses, I see three crosses!"

The mocking look vanished from Zachary's blonde features as he gave Dysmas a glance of alarm. Dysmas knew what he

was thinking. The fate of any captured and proven robber was crucifixion! Was this what old Sarah saw ahead for him?

He leaned forward and spoke sharply. "Be careful what you say, witch!"

Rocking back and forth the old woman went on as if in a trance: "I hear words. Someone says: "Remember me in your kingdom." And there is a great rich voice that promises Paradise!" The old woman stared at Dysmas. "You have a good future, my son," she said softly.

"Crosses and promises of Pardise," Zachary cried as he got up scornfully. "Let us get out of here before we become as addled as this hag."

They left her still crouching over the dish of sand. Outside they came upon a crowd heading toward the hill on which Nazareth was built.

Dysmas grabbed an ancient straggler by the arm. "Where are you all going?"

The graybeard stared at him with bleary eyes, impatient to be on his way. "To the hill," he said. "They've taken the Teacher there. The crowd are furious. Some claim they're going to hurl him over the cliff!" And the oldster hurried on after the others.

Zachary laughed. " It seems you've rescued your Teacher only to have Him stoned or tossed over the cliff by the hot-tempered!"

Dysmas did not stop to argue with the young thief. He hurried after the clamoring mob and soon he was deep in their midst. By the time they arrived at the hill he was in the forefront of them.

That was how he came to confront Him. The Teacher gazed at him for a moment with His large, understanding brown eyes. And in that moment Dysmas felt there was recognition, and complete forgiveness. He knew without the exchange of words that the Teacher knew him for what he was and had been, remembering him from boyhood, and knowing that he'd saved Him from the assassin. In those sad eyes was all knowledge and all compassion and Dysmas knew from this moment his life could be right again.

The jostling and cries of the crowd grew and then a strange thing occurred. No one of the angry mob could explain what it was. But in a flickering second He had vanished. No one could tell His stricken Mother any reasonable story but that he had been there and suddenly left. Dysmas broke away from the bewildered crowd feeling a great sense of elation and relief.

That night he told of the meeting as Rachel and the children sat with him by the fireside. He

finished saying: "I do not know what this all means, if it means anything. But whatever happens I want you to take our girl to Jerusalem. He will be there. He loves little chidren, and perhaps He may extend His healing love to her."

After a while he stepped outside. It had been good to see the joy that had appeared in Rachel's face as he'd admitted faith in the Teacher. It was dark now and the night was piercing cold. He had promised to meet Zachary and he would have to keep the rendezvous. Zachary would expect him to continue with their robbery and violence. Somehow he would have to get out of it.

But he must be careful. Zachary and the others would not understand. They could mistrust his motives and be vindictive. Even tip the authorities off about some of his past. He sighed. This was a chance that would have to be taken.

And so the end of the day had arrived. These were the quietest hours of his birthday. It had been eventful and stranger than he could ever have believed. He drew his robe about him. Well, had not the hag Sarah promised him riches and Paradise! No man could ask for more. Glancing fondly back at his home it seemed to him that Rachel and the children had given him a share of these things already.

He turned and walked slowly off into the blueness of the night. The far away cry of a nocturnal bird caused a chill to run through him. And for no reason that he could understand he all at once felt this might be his last birthday . . .

It has been given to few men to in their time mean so much to the peoples of the world. We will continue to mourn John Fitzgerald Kennedy for all this—and so much more.

Hans Stefan Santesson

murder on patio beach

by A. N. Glennon

The grey Navy sedan was waiting outside the front entrance of the Bachelor Officer's Quarters, engine idling, when Lieutenant Commander Tom Flynn stalked out the door and climbed in. He got a small amount of satisfaction from slamming the door hard, but the instant the door closed the driver gunned the engine and threw Tom back into the seat. He gave the driver a quick, irritated look.

"What's the trouble, Thomas?"

"I don't know for sure, sir. I heard the Security Patrol found a body over at Patio Beach."

"Who is it?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Why call me in on it? Things that happen on the base are handled by Security, not the Shore Patrol."

"Mr. Flynn, all I know is that I was told to come after you. I guess you're getting such a reputation around here, they want you whenever there's trouble."

"If they'd run this base by its organization plan, instead of who has what reputation, I'd be able to get a night's sleep once in a while. Now, I'll prob-

A. N. Glennon returns with another story about Lt. Comdr. Tom Flynn, Permanent Shore Patrol Officer for the Key West Naval Base, who'd had no training in criminal investigation and didn't care for it—and still gets called whenever something happens anywhere on the base. Including murder . . .

ably have to call off my fishing party, and ruin the first free Saturday I've had in weeks."

"Yeah, unless you call what you're going to be doing fishing."

The car sped down the waterfront with siren and flasher operating. Ahead of them, the marine railway rose up, slicing across the road. A submarine had been hauled up in it and was resting on the keel blocks, cradled in the flimsy-looking network of steel girders, its greenish bottom paint reflecting back the headlight beams. Thomas swung left to go around the structure. A hundred yards further on, he circled right to round its bow. Without stopping for the blind corner, he straightened out onto the stretch of road leading to the Fleet Sonar School. The new, modern buildings loomed ahead of them in the dark, their squared outlines partly obscured by the shadowy palm trees which were part of the school's landscape plan. The weak standing lights inside the building glowed dimly through the windows.

"Going a little over the speed limit, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. Fifteen miles an hour is too slow; they want you as soon as possible."

Thomas wrestled the car around the right turn that led to the Patio Beach parking area, ignoring the stop sign at the corner. Tom, looking ahead, saw that the parking lot was pretty well filled for the middle of the night. He groaned as he recognized the two sedans; with the Admiral and the Captain both there, he wouldn't have a chance of getting the investigation turned over to the right people.

There were a couple of pick-up trucks; probably the Base Duty Officer and the Security Patrol, while the closed panel truck was his own Shore Patrol wagon. The car skidded to a stop, sending pellets of gravel pinging against the trucks.

Tom opened the door and got out. He stood there in the dark letting his eyes adjust after the headlights were turned off. In the moonlight his bulk was evident, outlined against the light grey of the sedan. A former football player, he had kept in shape, and looked it. The little crowd waiting on the concrete apron in front of the refreshment stand turned to watch him walk lighty and quietly toward them, his coordination and control obvious even in this simple action. A light shone in his eyes from a powerful electric lantern, and he squinted.

"Ah, Flynn; see you finally got here," a gruff voice greeted him.

Tom looked toward the voice. Still blinded by the light, he knew who had spoken. That short, stocky figure in white

could only be the Admiral.

"Good evening, sir," Tom said. "I understand you sent for me."

"Yes, Flynn, I thought with your experience in investigations, you'd be able to handle this better than any of our other officers." The Admiral turned to a taller, slender officer beside him. "Don't you agree, Henry?"

Captain Forrest nodded vigorously. "Yes, sir. In fact, if you recall, my first reaction was to suggest that Lieutenant Commander Flynn be sent for."

"That's right, Henry, you did. Well, I suppose we ought to let Mr. Flynn get down to business. You don't mind if we watch you work, do you? I've always thought this a fascinating business, and this is my first chance to watch an expert at work right from the beginning."

Tom flushed. He'd had a few lucky breaks in his first investigations. But his early success had landed him his present assignment as Permanent Shore Patrol Officer for the Key West Naval Base. He'd had no training in criminal investigation, and didn't particularly care for it. Still, for an amateur, he got better results than he expected, bumbling his way through.

Confident that he was concealed by the dark, he shrugged, accepting the inevitable. He sighed; carefully, so the Admiral wouldn't hear.

"You're welcome to watch, Admiral, though I hardly qualify as an expert." He turned toward the rest of the group. "Has anyone a spare flashlight?"

Chief Evans, his night supervisor at Shore Patrol Headquarters, handed him a light, then pointed down the beach.

"The body's over there, sir. We all waited here, so as not to mess things up." His voice dropped to a confidential level. "I think everyone has trampled around over there, getting a close look. I had to do some fast talking to get them all back over here."

Tom walked slowly toward the one guard posted by the body. He heard the others fall in behind him, and shook his head in concern. If those sightseers hadn't disturbed the scene, he'd be surprised. Shining his light around as he approached, Tom saw the sand was not likely to tell him much. Too many feet had trampled it, and it was too dry, this far from the water, to retain any lasting impressions.

He stopped ten feet from the body, and shined his light ahead onto the crumpled form. Swearing under his breath, he turned to Chief Evans.

"That looks like a woman," he said.

Evans nodded. "I forgot to mention that." Sympathetically, he added, "Better not take it all at once, sir. It's a pretty ugly job, especially if you haven't

been prepared for it."

"Thanks, Chief." Tom swallowed, and his mouth grew dry. His stomach always turned somersaults when he saw violent death at its worst; a characteristic his Patrolmen were well aware of. He'd always been a little embarrassed by it, preferring to maintain the appearance of a man who could take anything life had to offer. The restless shuffling of feet in the sand behind him told Tom he'd stalled as long as he could. The Admiral was getting impatient.

"Is there a photographer here?" Tom asked.

"Yes, sir," a voice replied.

"Before we do anything else, I want a set of pictures. Take shots of the beach for about six feet all around the body, then four of the body itself, from different directions. Finally, I want one from as near overhead as you can get."

The photographer busied himself with camera and flashgun, while Tom walked over to the Security Patrolman.

"Did you discover the body?"

"Yes, sir," the Marine replied. "I make an hourly swing through the base. The beach was clear when I checked it at midnight. On the one o'clock trip, I found her laying there, just the way she is now. I called in on the radio, then came back here to stand guard."

"While you were waiting, did you see or hear anything unusual?"

"Not a thing, Commander."

Tom went off to one side, alone, to calm down. He didn't want any company while he was preparing for his first close look at the broken bundle lying a few feet away. The glimpses of the body under the stark white glare of the intermittent flashbulbs finally forced him to turn his back. While he waited for the photographer to finish, he heard a siren, signaling the arrival of the ambulance from the Naval Hospital.

The Hospital Corpsmen approached the group briskly, carrying a stretcher between them. By blinking his flash at them, Tom stopped them from approaching too close until the photographer could climb a nearby palm tree for the final picture. At last Tom, concentrating on self control, turned back to the body.

He approached, waiting until the last possible moment to turn his light on it. The dark stains on the white skin stood out plainly, now that his eyes had gotten used to the dark. He switched on his light, immediately wishing he hadn't had to. The sight, coupled with the smell of decaying seaweed blowing from the highwater mark on the beach, was almost too much for him.

"Why do people do things

like this?" he moaned, while his audience muttered in sympathy.

Shuddering, he waited for his stomach to slither back to its normal position. The woman had been young and well-formed, as far as he could tell. Lying on her face, she had been brutally beaten, and the killer had apparently struck at random. Her dress, shredded by the blows, revealed bruises and pulpy spots from the back of her head to her knees. Tom looked at Chief Evans, a black, ugly look that indicated trouble for whoever had done this. He shook his head in perplexity.

"I don't know, Chief. Can anyone hate enough to be capable of this, or do you suppose someone did it for a thrill?"

"It's not pretty, is it? I don't know why anyone has to be this violent."

"Has there been any identification yet?" Tom asked.

"No, sir. We waited for you, so you could see the way she was found."

"Must have been some sort of crude club, to do that kind of damage." He rose and beckoned to the Corpsmen. "Let's turn her over."

He reached out and took one of her shoulders. A Corpsman bent to her feet and, together, they turned her over. Tom straightened and looked in shocked silence after they turned her. Though her back had taken the worst part of the beating, a terrific blow across the bridge of her nose had flattened her face. The shape of the indentations showed a squared edge had struck.

Tom stared. The auburn hair had fallen over her face before the blow had struck, and several locks still covered her forehead disappearing into the awful wound, where they were glued by the dried blood.

"Looks like we've got the murder weapon here," Tom said, wincing again.

A length of two by four had been uncovered when they turned the body over. Lying partially under the woman, no one had noticed it before. About three feet long, it looked as if it had been a fairly new piece of scrap lumber. Bloodstains covered almost two thirds of its length, while dents and scars along the sides and edges gave testimony to the violence of the attack.

The Corpsman reached for it, but Tom stopped his hand.

"Don't touch it," he said. "There may be some fingerprints on it, and we don't want to ruin them." He called Chief Evans over.

"Chief, get something to pick this up with, and see that it is taken to Headquarters. Have someone check with FBI in Miami, and find out the procedure for sending it in for analysis."

"I thought you couldn't get fingerprints from wood, Commander."

"That's where a lot of bludgeon murderers fall down Evans. The FBI has some people that can bring them out, if they're there to bring out. This wood is smooth enough to give them a good chance."

Tom called the photographer again. "Get another shot of the body in this position, before we remove the weapon."

He walked down the beach a few feet and lit a cigarette. Something about the face drew him back for another, closer look. Battered almost beyond recognition, still there was something familiar about it. With an audible groan, he turned to the Admiral.

"I think I recognize her, sir."

"You do?" The Admiral was startled by Tom's fast action, though this was exactly the sort of thing he had expected. "Was she a friend of yours?"

"Yes, sir. She's Gail Morgan. Her sister is married to a friend of mine, Don Corwin." Tom turned to Captain Forrest. "He's the Naval Station Electronics Officer, Captain; comes under your command."

Captain Forrest was stunned. "Gloria Corwin's sister? Why, yes, there is a resemblance, isn't there?" He fumbled for a cigarette, musing. "Since he's one of my officers, I guess it's my duty to notify him, isn't it?"

"Captain, I wonder if you'd let me do it? Don and I have been close friends for years. We were classmates at the Naval Academy, and we've served in the same areas quite a bit since then. Besides, I'll have to talk to him as soon as possible, for the investigation."

"Well, I'll admit I wasn't relishing the idea of telling him, but I'm ready to do what's necessary." The Captain put his hand on Tom's shoulder. "It's pretty hard to break that kind of news, Flynn. If you'd rather I do it, I'd leave immediately afterwards so you could get on with what you have to do. She was a Key West girl, wasn't she?"

"I'll take care of telling them, Captain. Gloria and Gail aren't real Conchs, though. They came down here together about four years ago, after all their relatives up north had died. Gloria took a teaching job, and Gail worked as base librarian. Don and Gloria met shortly after the girls got here, and married about three years ago."

"Well, Flynn, in that case, Corwin is the one to notify."

"Right, sir. I'd better get on that right away." Tom looked at his watch. "It's nearly three now, sir. I'll stay on the investigation as long as I can; it wouldn't pay to try for just a couple of hours of sleep."

"All right, you do it the way

you want. I'll send an order over to your office this morning, formally appointing you to the investigation. You'll have full authority to call on any of my forces to assist you, and to act as your own liaison with outside authorities, if that's necessary."

"Aye, aye, sir. Thank you." Tom saluted as the Captain turned to leave, in company with the Admiral. Relaxing with the departure of the senior officers, he beckoned to the Hospital Corpsmen, who were standing by for instructions.

"I'll want an autopsy as soon as possible. Have the doctor call Shore Patrol when he's finished, to give us the time and actual cause of death, and anything else that's pertinent."

The Corpsmen lifted the body, straightening it gently on the stretcher, which they then picked up and slid into the ambulance. The driver returned to speak to Tom.

"Did you want us to get the Duty Medical Officer up for this, sir, or can it wait for working hours?"

"Good grief, driver!" Tom exploded. "I don't care who you have to get up, so long as he's competent to do the job. It won't hurt any of those doctors to get up and earn a little of that special pay they draw. They're only on call about once a week, aren't they? I said I want the information as soon as possible. Does that sound like I expect you to wait for working hours?"

The Corpsman turned and left, without replying.

Tom turned to the Base Duty Officer. "I want this beach roped off, and a guard posted to keep people away until I can look it over in daylight," he said.

The Duty Officer nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll check later on, to make sure we have enough guards. Once the word gets out, we're liable to have a lot of people come down here for a look."

Chief Evans had sent Thomas back to Headquarters with the truck while Tom was organizing the Medical Corps. Now, he looked at Tom with a weak smile. "Looks like a long weekend, doesn't it, sir?"

"Sure does, Evans; long and unpleasant. This next task is going to be pretty hard. Drive slowly, will you? I've got to figure out what I'm going to say."

The car cruised through the base, with Tom deep in thought. It was going to be a blow to both Don and Gloria, as the three of them had been a close-knit family. Though Don had married Gloria, it was Gail he had dated first; he probably felt toward her as he would toward his own sister. Tom had always admired Gail for the way she

had stepped aside when Gloria set out to capture Don. At the wedding, Gail had been a bridesmaid, and showed nothing but pleasure at the way things had turned out.

Tom looked out the window at the darkened base. A car, returning late from town, dimmed its lights at the main gate, then brightened them again as it passed through. As his sedan, turned left, toward the officers' quarters area, Tom saw the Marine guards return to the desk inside their shelter, leaning on it to relax from the boredom of their long watch.

"Just drop me in front of the Echoasis, Evans, and go on back to Headquarters without waiting. This may take me quite a spell, and I can walk down when I'm finished."

When the car stopped at the curb, the main BOQ, where Tom lived, was across the street to their left on a plot on high ground. The two annexes were to their right, at street level. The Echoasis, a small Officers Club, was between the two annexes, with its street entrance directly across from the driveway leading to the quarters for married officers. Tom got out of the car, waved the Chief on, and crossed the street. The long car shelter, perpendicular to the street, was full, as might be expected at this hour. Tom walked slowly up the asphalt driveway, trailing his fingers idly along the wire fence that surrounded the children's play yard, unconsciously trying to grip the fence, hold himself back so he wouldn't have to face the Corwins so soon.

Don and Gloria lived in a cottage at the far end of the driveway, next to the retaining wall that separated the quarters from the BOQ. Tom approached the wooden-jalousied door to the cottage and lifted the knocker. The two-toned bell rang out almost deafeningly in the quiet night, and a light came on in the bedroom almost immediately. A shadow passed through the living room and paused behind the door to turn on the porch light. A few seconds later, the door opened.

"Why, hello, Tom," Don said a sleepy smile on his face. "What brings you here, all dressed up?"

"I have to talk to you for a minute, Don."

Don opened the door wider and stepped back. He beckoned with his head, the motion hardly disturbing the tousled, close-cropped curls of his blond hair. "Come on in. We're pretty wide awake anyhow, so you won't disturb us. Had to take Gloria up to Miami today for some new things, and we only got back a couple of hours ago. Couldn't get away without buying her a fancy dinner, you know."

He stepped across the room and lit a lamp. Pulling his robe more closely around him to protect him from the night chill, he sat down, then reached over to the chairside table for a cigarette. He lit it, blew a cloud of smoke into the air and looked at Tom, his smile crinkling the corners of his blue eyes.

"Well, I suppose you're on business, or you wouldn't be in uniform. If it's one of my men, I'll be glad to do what I can for him. Of course, it really ought to be Ensign Frame you're seeing; I'm taking a few days leave and won't be back at work until Wednesday."

"It isn't one of your men, Don; I'm afraid it concerns you directly."

Don frowned, tensing, and waited for what Tom had to say; but the silence was broken by a woman's voice, coming from the bedroom.

"What is it, honey?"

"It's Tom Flynn. He's got something to tell me, but he hasn't gotten around to it yet. Go back to sleep."

"Is he sober?"

Don laughed. "Isn't he always?"

"Well, calling at three in the morning, I had my doubts. You two'll probably sit there talking the rest of the night; I might as well get up and fix a pot of coffee for you."

Tom sat rigidly in his chair during the exchange, staring at the bedroom door. He heard a closet door squeak, followed by the rattle of wire hangers on the rack, and turned to Don.

"This is going to be a shock to both of you. You'd better be the one to tell Gloria. Gail was killed tonight, down on Patio Beach."

Don's eyes widened. "Gail? What was she doing out there?"

"I don't know yet. I'm the investigation officer, but all I know right now is that she was murdered."

Gloria came out of the bedroom then, her sheer nightgown covered by a fingertip length terrycloth robe. She smiled pleasantly at Tom, though her eyes were puffy with sleep.

"Hi, Tom. Must be pretty important to bring you over here at this hour."

"It is important, Gloria, but I'm going to let Don tell you about it."

Don led Gloria back into the bedroom where, shortly, she began sobbing. He came out a few minutes later, shutting the door behind him.

"She's pretty upset."

"I imagine so. I'll hold off talking to her until later in the morning. You ought to be able to give me enough to start on, anyhow. Had Gail been on the outs with anyone lately?"

"Golly, Tom, I don't know anyone who'd have it in for Gail.

I can't even imagine it. You knew her; who'd want to kill her?"

"I know what you mean," Tom said. "She was a sweet girl. But someone did it, and we've got to find out who. Let's try another tack; who were her friends?"

"She had friends all over town. I guess the ones that were closest to her were Gloria and I, George Hauk, Ed Matkor, and Fred Black. Then there was her landlady, Mrs. Conly, and the people at the library. Go beyond that, and you can just about list the whole city. How can you get around to all of them?"

"If I can get a break or two, I won't have to look too far. Since we don't know anyone who'd qualify as an enemy, and she was too smart to have gone anywhere with a stranger, all we have left is her friends. We'll have to look for something that could turn a friend into a murderer. Those three men you named, now; would you say any of them were interested in anything more permanent than an occasional date?"

"I'd say all three were pretty serious, and Gail was interested in each of them. Couldn't seem to make up her mind, though."

"Well, that gives me a starting point, anyhow. I don't think I know any of them. Where can I find them?"

"George Hauk is a Chief Sonarman on the Sculpin. He's pretty sharp; made Chief in record time, and I heard they were about to nominate him for a commission. Ed Matkor is a Lieutenant, Communication Officer on the Bonefish. He just qualified in submarines. They say he wears a pair of dolphins on his undershirt, so people will know he's qualified, even when he's relaxing. Fred Black is another Lieutenant; teaches the Submarine Officer's course at the Sonar School."

"Gail had a preference for submariners, didn't she? Funny I never met any of those fellows, or even heard her mention them. Guess she never thought I'd be interested in who she went out with. Of course, I only dated her a few times, and saw her here once in a while. No reason she should have mentioned them."

"She was pretty close-mouthed with all her friends. The way she put it, as long as none of them was worried about competition, they wouldn't be putting extra pressure on her, and she could take her time deciding whether any of them was the one she really wanted."

"She hadn't made up her mind then?"

"I'm not sure, but I think she had. She hinted not too long ago that she might be ready to get married. I can check with Gloria later on and let you know."

"All right, Don. I'll come back later. Right now, I'd better start talking to the three you mentioned. Do they all live on the base?"

"That's right; Matkor and Black live in the BOQ, and Hauk is at the Submarine Barracks."

"That'll make it easy. Let me use your phone for a minute, will you?"

Since the telephone belonged to the city system, Tom had to dial the Naval Base number, then ask for the extension of Shore Patrol Headquarters.

He gave Chief Evans his itinerary, hung up, and turned toward the door. "Try to get Gloria to rest, so she'll be able to help us later on. You can check with the Hospital sometime before noon to see when they'll release the body. In the meantime, you can make the funeral arrangements."

Don gripped Tom's hand tightly at the door.

"Thanks for coming by, Tom. It wouldn't have been as easy, if Captain Forrest had done it. If there's anything else we can do, let us know. We'll want to see this brute caught as soon as possible."

Tom walked slowly down the driveway, trying to puzzle it out. As he and Don had decided, it was very unlikely that a stranger would have been able to lure Gail to the beach late at night. From the damage done, and the viciousness of the attack, the killer had probably been a man; possibly a rejected suitor.

He turned right at the end of the driveway, went another fifty yards, and walked up the steps to the main BOQ. Crossing the driveway in front of the building, he passed between the termite-ridden pillars of the colonial entrance, into the lobby. The night Steward was lounging against the desk, reading a comic book.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Flynn," the Steward said, "what can I do for you?"

"What rooms do Lieutenants Black and Matkor have?"

"Lemme see, now. Lieutenant Black . . . which Black is that?"

"He's an instructor at Sonar School."

"Yeah. He's across the street, in room 109. Mr. Matkor, now, he's right here, in room 214."

Tom tried 214 first. He knocked and waited, with no reply. He knocked again, and called Matkor's name, but there was still no response. Trying the doorknob, he found the room unlocked, and pushed the door open, calling again. Finally, he turned on the overhead light. No one was there, and the bed had not been slept in. Tom glanced quickly around, sniffed the odor of drying shaving cream and wet towels, and decided Matkor had been there

sometime in the past evening. He turned out the light, shut the door, and went downstairs.

Across the street, the same process was repeated, with better results. After the second knock and the calling of Black's name, the lights came on in the room, and the door opened.

Black was tall and skinny, and wore only a pair of frayed pajama bottoms. His dark, deepset eyes looked hollowly out at Tom from under thick eyebrows. The heavy overnight growth of beard outlined his jaw, and he scratched at it sleepily. He looked at Tom without saying a word, waiting for him to speak.

"My name is Flynn," Tom said. "I'm the Base Shore Patrol Officer. I'd like to talk to you."

Black glanced over his shoulder at his alarm clock, then shrugged in resignation. "Okay," he said wearily, "come on in."

He stepped back from the door, waved at the leather-covered easy chair, and slumped down on the bed. "What's it all about?" he asked.

"Were you acquainted with Gail Morgan?"

"Why, sure, she's . . . did you say were?'

"Were. She was found on Patio Beach a couple of hours ago. Dead."

Black's eyes closed for a moment, and his face clouded. "Dead," he murmured. "I can't believe it."

His eyes opened wider, and he stared intensely at Tom.

"Are you sure? Couldn't there be some mistake?"

Tom shook his head. "No mistake. I knew her myself, and recognized her when I went over to start the investigation."

Black buried his face in his large hands. "How could anyone do this to her?"

"Do what, Black?"

"Kill her," Black replied, raising his face once more.

"I didn't say anyone had killed her."

"You said she was found dead, didn't you?"

"It might have been suicide or accident, but you're right; she was murdered. I'm told you were one of her steady dates. When did you see her last?"

Black thought for a moment, then said, "Wednesday night. We went over to the Fort Taylor Officers Club for dinner, then went back to her place for the rest of the evening. We played records and danced a little, and I left early."

"You haven't seen her since?"

"No." Black swallowed, started to add something else, then fell silent.

"What else were you going to say?"

"Well, look, Commander, it's this way. I loved Gail, and I'd asked her to marry me. Wednesday night, she gave me her answer. She said she couldn't mar-

ry me, and wouldn't tell me why. Then she said it would be best, since I felt that way, if we stopped seeing each other."

"Have you talked to her since then?"

"I called her the next night, trying to get her to change her mind. She said she was going to be pretty busy for a while, and wouldn't be able to see me again. I guess I got her upset, because she sounded like she was crying when she hung up."

"I see. What did you do last night?"

"I ate supper in the BOQ, then went over to the Echoasis for a few drinks. I left there and went to Harry Fulton's room with a couple of other fellows. We played poker for a few hours, until someone told us we were too noisy. The game broke up around one, and I came down here and turned in. That's about it."

"Who else was in the game?"

"Harry Fulton, of course; then there was Ben Davisson, Bill Suley, Bill Conrad, and Jim Sullivan. That'd be six of us, wouldn't it? That's all, then."

"All right. I may have to check back later for more. I'll want you to come over to Shore Patrol Headquarters and give us a written statement later on."

"Sure. Any particular time?"

"I'll send a car for you about nine. I may not be there myself, but Chief Evans will be able to act for me."

Tom looked out the window and saw the sky getting brighter. He sighed. It had been a long night, and there was no rest in sight. He paused in the BOQ washroom to splash cold water on his face. It felt good, but it couldn't replace a night's sleep.

On the way out he paused on the front steps to light a cigarette. If Black's story checked out, one possible suspect could be eliminated. He turned left and went down the street toward the Submarine Barracks. The big submarine emblem painted on the sign in front of the barracks gave him a twinge as he looked at it. It'd be so pleasant to be back on one of the boats, with nothing but shipboard troubles to worry about. He felt beyond his depth, investigating this murder.

In the barracks lobby, he stopped to pick up the base phone. Evans answered on the first ring.

"This is Mr. Flynn, Evans. I'm at the Submarine Barracks now; probably be through in a few minutes. When you send the car for me, send a couple of men along. I want one stationed in the main BOQ, to wait for Lieutenant Matkor. When he shows up, Mr. Matkor is to be asked to come to Shore Patrol Headquarters, to talk to me. He is not to know the subject to

be discussed."

"Yes, sir," Evans replied.

"The other man is to check with each of these five officers." Tom read him Black's list. "Inquire what each did last night, after explaining that I'm conducting an investigation. The main thing I'm interested in is the names of the people they were with, and the times and places they were together. None of them is to see the list of names."

"Got it. I'll get men on that right away, sir, and have the car go on to pick you up after dropping them off."

"One more thing, Evans, before I forget it. Have someone pick up Lieutenant Black from BOQ Annex one at nine. He's to give a statement of his activities last night, and anything else he can."

When Tom turned away from the phone, he found the man with the Barracks Guard Duty staring at him in curiosity.

"Gee, sir, did you want something here?"

"Yes, where would I find Chief Sonarman Hauk, from the Sculpin?"

"The Sculpin Chiefs live at the far end of the second deck, sir. I'll show you."

Tom followed him up the stairs, then down the long barracks aisle. They passed between the line of double-decker bunks, from which the early risers were already getting up. Each man paused in whatever he was doing, to turn and watch silently as Tom passed. At the far end, the Chiefs had double rooms, setting them off from the dormitory section. The guard paused outside one of the grey-painted doors and pointed.

"Fine; thank you." Tom knocked at the door. Bedsprings creaked, and a voice mumbled angrily. He knocked again.

"All right, all right; come in." The voice continued to mutter, and Tom was glad he couldn't make out the words.

The man on the bed sat upright, covers falling into his lap, when he saw Tom. He leaped out of bed, to stand at attention on the floor.

"Sorry, sir. Wasn't expecting you."

"No, I don't suppose you usually have reveille by the Shore Patrol, do you?" Tom agreed. "Are you Chief Hauk?"

"No, sir, that's Hauk's bunk over there."

The other bunk was made up; covers straight, and blankets folded.

"Where is he,"

"Beats me, Commander. He left here last night; had a date out in town. Said he was going to come in early, but I haven't seen him since he left."

"Did he say who he was going out with?"

"I think it was that girl who works in the library, Gail something."

Tom breathed faster. "Do you have an idea where he might be? Any places he spends a lot of time at? It's very important for me to find him."

"No, sir. All the places he hangs out at close early; places like the library and the gym. At night, if he's not out with this dame of his, he's usually here or on the boat. Reads and studies a lot. They just put through his nomination for a commission yesterday; maybe he's out celebrating."

"Think he might be on the boat?"

"I doubt it, sir. Today being Saturday, he wouldn't have to be there, and he likes to sleep up here when he can. He doesn't have the duty today, I know."

Tom left the room and went back outside. It was full daylight now, and his car was waiting for him.

"Take me down to the Sculpin first," Tom told the driver.

At the pier, Tom walked over to the gangway. "Is Chief Hauk aboard?" he asked the Topside Watch.

"I'll check, sir." The Watch leaned over a hatch and shouted, "Hey, below! Chief Hauk down there?"

After a short wait and a muffled reply, he straightened. "No, sir," he said. "Hasn't been aboard since yesterday afternoon."

Back at Shore Patrol Headquarters, Tom sent another man out, to be stationed at the Submarine Barracks, waiting for Hauk. Chief Evans reported that Matkor had not yet shown up, and nothing else had developed since Tom had started the investigation. When the phone rang, Tom answered.

"This is the Duty Medical Officer, Naval Hospital," the voice crackled. "I've completed with Miss Morgan. She died between midnight and one o'clock, due to the blow across the bridge of her nose. I found quite a few splinters in the wounds; was she beaten with a wooden club?"

"That's right, doctor; thanks for the information. Will you have her effects sent over here? I'd like to have the splinters, too, if you'd put them into an envelope and put them with her clothing."

"Can do. Oh, yes, Mr. Flynn; as it turned out, Miss Morgan was pregnant."

"Okay, doctor, thanks again. I appreciate . . . she *what?*"

"That's right, she was about two months gone. Well, if you need anything else, let us know out here."

Tom went into his office and leaned back in his chair. The

last bit of news had caught him completely off guard. Gail just hadn't been that sort of girl. He shook his head wearily — it didn't fit with what he knew of Gail, but after all, how much do any of us know about one another? He put his feet on the desk and rubbed both hands through his brown, crew cut hair. The head rubbing relaxed him a little, but the sight of Evans coming in with a cup of coffee and some sweet rolls brought his morale soaring again.

"Thought these might come in handy, sir. You look like you could use a little pickup."

Tom smiled his thanks as he put his feet back on the floor and reached for a roll. "Haven't wanted to stop going until we had some leads to work on."

When he had finished his light breakfast, Tom rose from his desk and went into the outer office. "Let's take a trip to the beach, Evans. We might find something we missed last night."

The drive through the base was more sedate than the last trip to Patio Beach. Traffic was heavier, and the Saturday morning line at the Naval Exchange gas station was already a couple of hundred feet long, though the station wouldn't open for another half hour. After passing this small traffic jam, the road was clear, and they got to the beach without further delays.

The curious had already heard of the tragedy, and Tom had to squeeze his way through the crowd to get to the scene. Considering the number of people who had milled around last night, the spot where the body had been found was well preserved. The bloody sand showed how Gail had rolled around during the beating, and the final imprint of her body had not yet drifted over. Tom searched out from the b'oodstained little hollow, looking for anything that might shed light on the killing. Twenty feet away, toward the parking area, he found a woman's shoe, half-buried in the sand.

"This looks like one I've seen Gail wear," he said. "I'll take it along."

The shoe showed no signs of blood or scuffing. While it wouldn't offer much help in solving the crime, it would complete the personal effects, when the time came to account for them. Nothing else was to be found, so they returned to Headquarters.

Tom put the shoe into a side drawer of his desk. "When her things are returned from the Hospital, Evans, put this with them." Shutting the drawer, he looked up at the wall clock. "I guess the morning's well enough along for the police day shift

to be settled in. I'll call Lieutenant Castro, and get him to go along with me to Miss Morgan's apartment."

Gail's landlady lived in the old frame house that had been divided into small apartments. Tom stood to one side while Pete Castro began the interview, his handsome, olive-tinted face expressing all the tragedy of the situation while he outlined it to Mrs. Conly.

"Yes, I saw Gail go out last night; she was with that young Chief she dated. He seemed wrong for her, somehow. So serious, and always looking nervous, like he was afraid he'd forgotten something."

"What time did she leave, Mrs. Conly?"

"Oh, I don't know. Sometime around seven thirty, eight o'clock, I suppose it was. She waved goodbye to me, and said she'd see me when she got back. She thought she'd be in early."

"You and she get together often?"

"Oh, yes. Especially since her sister got married. We used to have a regular hen party once or twice a week."

"Did she seem to have any particular worries, the past few days or weeks?"

"Why, I don't think so; nothing you could point at, leastwise. Nothing at all like when Gloria married that nice Mr. Corwin that Gail had her heart set on. Even then, she finally got over it. She said Gloria had been taking her toys away from her ever since they were little girls; this was just the same thing, only on a larger scale."

Mrs. Conly paused, thoughtful, then continued, "I guess you could say she had been a little worried in the past few weeks. Nothing she thought worth talking about though. Then, the last week or so, she began perking up a little; acted like whatever it was, had quit bothering her."

She led them into the house and up the worn carpeting to the second floor. "Here's her rooms," she said, inserting a key into the lock. "It's just the way she left them. She was always such a neat person; never let anything stray out of its own place."

Tom thanked her for showing them up, while Pete checked the living room rapidly, but thoroughly. "There's nothing here that looks useful, Tom, let's try the bedroom," Pete finally said.

The bedroom was as neat as the living room. In the dresser, the clean clothes were carefully folded and stacked in the drawers, with the flimsier articles wrapped in tissue paper. Pete opened the closet door. Shoes were neatly lined up on the floor, dresses nearly filled the rack,

and Gail's collection of tiny hats was evenly spaced along the shelf. Pete shoved the dresses to one side to look behind them, and one slid to the floor, a white linen dress with pleated skirt. Tom picked it up to replace it on the hanger, sniffing the delicate perfume which clung to it, a fragrance he had always associated with Gail.

"She wore this dress a couple of times when I dated her," he said, holding it out to look at it. He returned it to the closet as Pete, already on the other side of the room, gave a startled whistle. Tom turned, to see Pete holding a small bottle.

"What's that?"

"Little pills. Label says they're for insomnia. According to the date, she's had them about a month, and the bottle's still full. Probably phenobarb, and more than enough to kill her. She ever complain of insomnia?"

"Not that I remember. Seems to me she used to brag about how she dropped off the instant her head touched the pillow. Odd she should have those around."

"Yeah. If she needed the stuff, there ought to be some gone from the bottle by now." Castro pocketed the bottle. "I'll check on these for you, let you know what the story is, later on. Let's talk to Mrs. Conly some more."

Mrs. Conly was convinced that Gail never had any trouble sleeping. At least, Gail had never mentioned it to her. "Still," she said, "there was a time, a couple of months back, when she was worried about Gloria. She was restless a few nights. Gloria went up to Bethesda, the Navy Hospital there, for a complete physical examination, you know." Her voice dropped to a lower level. "Gail didn't talk about it much, but I think it was because Gloria hadn't had any children yet, and was worried about it. Gail talked to Mr. Corwin a few times while Gloria was gone, and I think she was worried about the way he felt; he seemed to set a lot of store by a large family."

"Well, how about Gail, Mrs. Conly? Did you get a chance to meet all the different men she went out with?"

"Oh, yes; of course. She always brought her young men in to say hello to me. You ought to remember that, Mr. Flynn. Lately, she's been going out with just three men, though. That Chief, and two Lieutenants. I guess she liked them all, well enough, but then — oh, a month ago, I guess it was, she seemed to lose interest in them. Oh, she kept going out, and all, but it didn't look as if she cared much about anything, really. Then, she perked up again last week, all of a sudden."

"Didn't she ever give any hint as to what the trouble was?"

"No, she didn't. I just put it down to her worrying about being an old maid, or something like that. You know, we all go through those blue spells every so often, when nothing seems worthwhile. I figured she'd snap out of it sooner or later, and she did, sure enough."

Tom said goodbye to Pete outside the house, agreeing to check back if anything came up that might involve the city police in the case. At Shore Patrol Headquarters, Chief Evans reported that Lieutenant Black's story had been verified, putting him in the clear. Chief Hauk had not yet been traced, but Lieutenant Matkor had returned to the BOQ, and was now waiting for Tom in his office.

Tom found a tired-looking unshaven man in civilian clothes waiting for him. About five feet ten, muscular, he looked belligerently at Tom. His face, which might normally have been handsome, was twisted into an ugly frown.

"You want to see me?" he growled.

"Are you Matkor?"

"That's right."

"Where've you been all night?"

"That's no concern of yours. What's this all about, anyhow? This sailor picks me up, tells me you want to see me, and won't tell me what it's all about. Where do you get off treating an officer this way?"

"That's enough of that!" Tom shouted at him. "I'm investigating a murder, and I'm getting tired of the job; too tired to take any back talk from you or anyone else. Now, just sit down and answer the questions. If they're the right answers, you've got nothing to worry about."

Matkor had paled at the word, murder. He stood nervously for a few seconds, but had fumbled for a seat before Tom finished speaking.

"Murder? Who's been murdered? What've I got to do with it?"

"You're still a little confused, Matkor. *I'm* doing the investigating. I don't need any questions from you, just answers. Miss Gail Morgan was found dead last night, and you've been seeing a lot of her lately. Now, start giving me the answers: where were you last night? What did you do, and where've you been up to now?"

"Well, I . . . look, sir, can't I just say I didn't have anything to do with it, and let it stand at that? I'm a commissioned officer; my word is good."

"In a murder investigation, no one's word is good, without witnesses."

"But I can't give you my witness' name. She'd never admit it, anyhow; her husband would tear her apart." Matkor's hair

tumbled down over his forehead as he shook his head and moaned. "Oh, why do I have such lousy luck?"

"Matkor, you're in trouble, and you're not helping yourself a bit. You're a prime suspect, and all you can do is moan about your luck, and try to get me to swallow this fantasy about a married woman. Don't be silly." Tom paused, thoughtful. "Want to try to get yourself off the hook?'

Matkor nodded.

"Look, if there really is such a woman, do you think she'd like to see you up for murder?"

"No, sir."

"Where's her husband?"

"He went on an overnight fishing trip out to the Tortugas. He won't be back until late this afternoon."

"All right. I'll give you this chance to show your story is true. You call her and get her to meet you somewhere; say, the diner across the street. Tell her exactly what you're up against, and explain that she's the only one who can clear you. She won't be indentified in my report, and I'll be the only one who'll know, besides you." Tom looked Matkor in the eye. "This doesn't mean I believe your story, Matkor, so don't try to run. There'll be a couple of Shore Patrolmen keeping an eye on you all the time."

Matkor looked doubtful. "I don't think she'll do it, but I'll try."

"You'd better try. If she doesn't clear you, you'll spend a little time in custody, until we know where we stand. Whether or not you can clear yourself, I'll have some more questions later. You may know something that will help."

Chief Evans appeared at the door, frowing. "Well, sir, we've had a report on Hauk. He left Key West this morning, on the Havana plane."

Tom beat his fist against his forehead and groaned. "I suppose we should have thought of that possibility. Well, even though it's too late, check with the city police and see if they have any sort of working arrangement with Havana; we've got to get him back here. How did you get the report he had left?"

"One of the other men on the Sculpin saw him off. There were about four of them went over, all drunk. They must have been drinking all night."

"Well, maybe Hauk had something to drink about."

Matkor returned to the office an hour later, smiling. "She'll do it. She's over at the diner, and says she won't come in here. Can you come over there to talk to her?"

"I imagine that'll make it a little easier on her. Let's go."

The woman sitting sheepishly at a side table, shaded by a cluster of palm fronds, was an attractive brunette. She stared down at the table as Tom approached, and looked up only when Matkor introduced them.

"Helen, you'll tell him, won't you?" Matkor asked.

"Yes, Ed, I said I would." She looked directly at Tom, and admitted that Matkor's story was true. Tom didn't ask for details, verifying only that she could vouch for his whereabouts between eleven and two.

"There are a couple of details I must check, Mrs. Douglas, for my own protection. First of all, where are you staying?"

"We're at the Golden Terrapin Motel," she said.

"If you'll show me some identification, Mrs. Douglas, that will end it."

She showed him her driver's license, and some letters she carried in her purse. Tom rose, touching his fingers to his cap in soft salute.

"Thank you very much Mrs. Douglas. I know it took a lot of courage for you to come here. We both appreciate it."

At his desk, Tom checked with the Golden Terrapin. Mr. and Mrs. Douglas were registered there, and Mr. Douglas was fishing at the moment, but expected back later in the day. He was hanging up when Matkor reappeared, mopping his forehead.

"From now on, I'm steering clear of married women!"

"That's always good sense, Matkor, but your logic is poor. What you'd really better steer clear of are the ones who are about to get murdered. Tell me about Gail. How had she been feeling and acting lately? It looks as if this fellow Hauk is the one who killed her; he had a date with her last night, and skipped to Havana this morning. Still, to get him into court, we need solid evidence."

Matkor scratched his head. "Well, I haven't seen much of her for a week or so. Actually, if you want to know, she more or less gave me the brushoff on our last date."

"How was that?"

"I might as well tell you the whole thing. I'd been dating her for about a year, and thought she was really something. You know, getting to feel more and more like settling down, and all that. So, about two weeks ago, I asked her to marry me. She wouldn't answer me right then; made me wait. So, last week she finally says she can't; gave me that old 'love you like a brother, we'll always be friends' routine. She'd thought it all over she said, and decided she didn't love me enough to marry me. Since I

wanted to marry her, and she didn't want to, she said it would be best if we didn't have any more dates. It would just frustrate me, and arouse her pity. So, I haven't been able to get a date with her since."

"Did she mention any other fellow?"

"Not exactly. Just said she was making other plans."

"Had she been acting normally the last few weeks?"

"Come to think of it, I guess she's been sort of down in the dumps the last few weeks. But she was real cheerful, last time I went out with her."

"Never told you what was troubling her?"

"No, I never asked. I wasn't real sure she was acting different; it was just sort of an impression."

"All right, Matkor, that's all for now. I may want to talk to you again, later on."

"Okay, Commander."

Evans passed Matkor in the doorway. "Mr. Flynn, Thomas called the FBI in Miami. They'll be able to help us with that piece of two by four. I have all the instructions on how to ship it."

"Fine, Evans. The hospital is sending Miss Morgan's effects here, and they're including some splinters they removed from the body. Be sure to include them when you ship the weapon."

"Yes, sir. Incidentally, the beach guard found where the board came from. There's a scrap pile out near the refreshment stand at the beach. You probably didn't see it, because it's on the far side from where the body was. Lumber that isn't usable any more is put out there, to use in the barbecue pits."

Tom nodded. "You've made good progress, Evans. We're gradually building up the case. A little more evidence and we won't even have to question Hauk when we get our hands on him."

"On that, sir, the local police do have connections in Havana, but we got the word to them too late. Once the plane's passengers have cleared through the entry procedure, it takes a long while to track anyone down. We'd have to work through the State Department for that."

Tom sighed. "Have Thomas look into it. We may have to do just that. In the meantime, I'm going back to the Corwins' quarters; to see if Mrs. Corwin is able to talk about her sister yet, and to let them know how far we've gotten. You can reach me there."

"Aye, aye, sir. I'll send a driver out."

"I'll take the sedan myself, Evans, don't bother."

Tom drove slowly through

the Naval Station, glancing idly at the people walking to various destinations, none of them caring that there had been a murder committed on the base, or that others were working long hours, trying to bring in a killer. Noticing that the industrial workshops were closed, Tom suddenly realized that noon had passed, and he still hadn't eaten. Well with things beginning to slow down, he'd have a little free time after he talked to Don and Gloria.

When Don let him into the cottage, Tom stopped in embarassment. A few of the neighbors had stopped in to talk to Gloria, and it occurred to him that, sleepless, wrinkled, and unshaven, he'd be more likely to be taken for the murderer than for the investigator. The visitors made hasty exits, leaving him to talk privately with Don and Gloria.

"Let me get you a cup of coffee," Gloria offered.

"Thanks, I could really use one. I'm about to drop. Thought I'd drop by and let you know how things are going, and see if you could add anything to what I've found so far."

Gloria went out to the kitchen, while Don and Tom just sat. Neither said a word until she returned with the coffee. She sat down and rubbed her ankle, wincing as she touched it. With an apologetic smile, she said, "I stumbled last night, when we came home. A hose was laying across the walk, and I didn't see it in the dark. Those darn neighbor kids never put anything away after they play with it." She looked at Tom expectantly.

"Have you found out anything yet?"

"It looks as if Chief Hauk is the one we want. He had a date with her last night. Mrs. Conly saw her go out, and she never came back. Hauk didn't return to the barracks last night, but went out this morning on the Havana plane. If I'd been a little sharper, we could have caught him at the airport, but that thought never occurred to me."

"Oh, that's too bad. Can you get him back?"

"We're trying. Meanwhile, we're accumulating evidence, so we'll have the case ready as soon as we can get hold of him. We're shipping the weapon up to the FBI today, for analysis."

Don looked at him sharply. "Analysis? What sort of analysis?"

"Well, they can check the blood type, and match the splinters to it, to prove it was the actual weapon." Tom lit a cigarette, and turned to Gloria. "I know you're still a little dazed by Gail's death, but if you can

give me some more background information, it may help bolster our case. Do you know whether Gail had been having any trouble with Hank lately?"

"Not exactly trouble. He had been getting more serious about her, and she was afraid he was going to ask her to marry him."

"Afraid? Didn't she want to get married?"

"Of course. Every girl wants to marry. But she didn't want to marry him, and she didn't want his feelings hurt. Maybe she told him she wouldn't marry him, and he got so mad, he killed her."

"It's plausible. I've heard of men who felt that if they couldn't have a certain girl no one else would either. What sort of fellow is he?"

"Well, he's very ambitious; always trying to improve his mind. He made Chief very young, and still studies a lot. Besides all that, he's one of these physical fitness bugs; weight lifting, calisthenics, and like that."

"Violent temper?"

"I don't know about that. Nothing has ever set him off while I've been near him; maybe he works his temper off with bar bells, or something."

The phone rang while they talked, and Don answered. He held the receiver out to Tom. "For you," he mouthed.

Chief Evans had two bits of information for him. The first was that Pete Castro had called to confirm that Gail's pills were phenobarbital, and that the contents of the bottle were a double-sized prescription — though she'd never taken any, she had gotten her doctor to authorize a refill of her original prescription. After hearing the second piece of news, Tom hung up, a faint smile on his face.

"My Chief thought he had a new clue," he said. "Gail's dress had a Navy Exchange laundry mark on it."

At the mention of Gail, Gloria paled; her hands clenched, then relaxed again as she smiled at Tom. "I guess we'll have to come clean, then."

Tom stared at her.

"Gail and I were the same size, and we used to wear each other's clothes once in a while. When I wore her things, I'd have them cleaned before I returned them."

"You had me worried there, for a minute," Tom said in relief. "Didn't the two of you dress alike a lot?"

"Not really. We had the same taste in clothes, and often went shopping together, but most of our things were different. We did have some clothes that were the same."

The phone rang again, and

Don once more held it out to Tom. He listened, then hung up with a hurried acknowledgement, and stood up.

"Well, it sounds like we're nearly done. Hauk's at Headquarters now; how we got him so fast, I don't know. I'll have to go back there, and finish with you two later."

Hauk was waiting under guard in Tom's office. He sat in a straight chair, with his hands hanging between his knees, a worried frown on his face. He looked up expectantly when Tom walked in, but his face fell when he saw that Tom was a stranger to him. With bloodshot eyes, and a generally miserable expression, he was in the most miserable stage of a hangover.

"What's the trouble, sir?" he asked. "Why was I brought here?"

"You were brought here for questioning, Hauk. Why did you run off to Havana this morning?"

Hauk looked bewildered. "Run? I just went over with a couple of friends. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"Not if you had an out-of bounds pass. What made you come back so soon?"

"I sobered up a little on the flight over; then I decided the plans my friends had for the weekend didn't sound as good as they had while I was drunk. I took a quick look around when I got off the plane, and caught the next flight back."

"This isn't getting us anywhere, Hauk. Let's start at the beginning. Tell me about last night."

"Well, sir, I got all fouled up last night; first time in my life I've had that much to drink. My girl friend told me she didn't want to see me any more, and I took it pretty hard. I met a few fellows from my boat in the first bar I hit, and we stayed out all night. This morning, some one suggested going over to Havana, so I went along. When I came back, I went to the barracks to get some sleep, and the Shore Patrol brought me here. What did I do?"

"You know that as well as I do, Hauk, but if you want to do it that way, let's work up to it gradually. Was your girl Gail Morgan?"

"Yes, sir. I got nominated for a commission yesterday, and took her out to dinner to celebrate. I figured that was a good time for it, so I asked her to marry me. She turned me down cold; said she had other plans, and I wasn't to try to see her again. Said she wasn't good enough for me, and I ought to forget her. Wouldn't even let me take her all the way home. I left her on her corner about eleven thirty, and headed for

a bar." He wiped his forehead with a crumpled, dirty handkerchief. "It sure does leave you miserable, doesn't it?"

"Quit stalling, Hauk. What time was it when you left Gail for the last time?"

"Eleven thirty, Commander; then I went to a bar."

"What bar?"

"One of the bars on Duval Street; I don't know which one."

"It isn't good enough, Hauk. You saw her at eleven thirty, and hopped the first flight you could get out of Key West, in order to clear the country. I think you came back because of a guilty conscience." Tom's voice lowered to a quiet register. "You don't look like a cold-blooded killer. If you killed her in anger, I think remorse would set in pretty fast."

"Killed? Me, killed Gail?"

"Correct, Hauk. Let's quit the fairy tales. Want to change your story now?"

Hauk sat silently, face rigid. He looked down at the floor, shaking his head. When he looked back up at Tom, his face had melted into a mask of grief.

"Gail dead," he moaned. He sobbed once or twice, then gulped. "I can't help what you think, sir. I suppose it does look suspicious, and I don't blame you for thinking I did it." He sat straighter, and looked earnestly at Tom. "I didn't do it, sir. I couldn't have done anything to hurt Gail."

Tom called Evans in. "Lock him up for a while," he said. "We'll question him some more later."

After seeing to the prisoner, Evans returned to Tom's office, carrying a newspaper-wrapped bundle. "I thought you might like to go over her things, sir. Everything is right here."

Tom pulled the wrappings aside. The white dress was so bloody and torn that it was hardly recognizable. The underthings were grey from rolling in the sand, where they weren't frayed by the bludgeoning or stained with blood. The shoes were the only articles that hadn't been damaged.

Tom checked the laundry mark Evans had spotted, then put the bundle to one side of the desk.

"Evans, we ought to be able to break Hauk's story down without any trouble. Have him give you a list of the places he says he can remember going to last night, and the names of the people he was with. When he's given you his alleged itinerary, bring him back in here, and we'll see whether the sight of these clothes in daylight will spring loose a confession. He looks like he'd be ready to tell us the whole story, if we can touch the

right set of nerves. With the hangover he has, he shouldn't have much resistance to the right sort of pressure."

Tom sat back to think things out while he waited. There was still something wrong, and he wouldn't feel easy until he had it straightened out. Each of Gail's three suitors claimed to have been turned down, when he asked her to marry him. Yet, she had been planning her marriage only a week or so ago. One of the three must have lied, then. But why, when an admission of rejection was more damaging then claiming to have been accepted? Unless she had tried to force the father of her child into a marriage he didn't want. Tom nodded, satisfied that he had the answer to that aspect of the puzzle.

Evans knocked at the door frame and came into the office, followed by Hauk and a guard.

"Hauk, I thought a look at the results of your work would be more convincing persuasion than anything I could say to you." Tom pulled the bundle toward the center of the desk, and opened the paper.

Hauk stared at the pitiful remnants of Gail's clothing, paling at the sight. He gulped once or twice and turned his head away, but remained silent.

"Well, Hauk?"

"It's . . . it's terrible, sir, but I didn't do it."

"Just sit there for a while, Hauk, and look at these things. Evans, call the U. S. Marshal, so we can get him into proper custody."

Tom reached into his pocket for a cigarette and found an empty pack. He opened his desk drawer to get another pack from the carton he kept there, and stiffened as he looked into the drawer. He stared in unbelief, his mind rebelling as the truth forced itself upon him.

"Evans!" he shouted.

"Yes, sir." Evans came to the door.

"Look here." Tom lifted his hand from the drawer, and dropped a shoe onto the desk, next to the pair sent from the hospital.

Evans' jaw dropped. "Three shoes?"

"Three shoes, Evans. When you showed me the bundle, I thought you'd already added this one from the drawer."

Evans flushed as the extent of his oversight struck home. "I don't know how it slipped my mind, sir. I guess when I opened the package and saw a pair of shoes, I just forgot completely that we already had one shoe."

"It would have saved a lot of effort if you'd remembered. As soon as the Marshal comes, he and I'll make another call on the Corwins."

Guessing that he had been cleared, Hauk relaxed with an expression of relief. Tom glanced at him quickly, wondering how to make amends.

"Hauk," he said, "I gave you a pretty rough time, didn't I? And the only thing you'd done wrong was to leave for Havana without permission from your Commanding Officer. I'm sorry for all this, and I'll recommend that your skipper not take any action against you for your little trip."

Hauk, still shaken by all that had happened to him in the past few hours, left Tom's office. He stopped at the desk to pick up his belongings, and Evans beckoned a driver to take him back to the barracks and the rest he so badly needed.

When the Marshal arrived, Tom explained the situation to him, and they rode in silence to the Corwins' quarters. Tom sat slumped in his seat on the way down. This was a hard way to end a friendship that went back fifteen years. Don opened the door for them, looking inquiringly at the stranger with Tom.

"Don, we're about to make an arrest. This is the U. S. Marshal."

Don stuck out his hand, which the Marshal ignored. "Glad to meet you, Marshal. Going to take in the crumb who did this, are you?"

"Sit down, Don. Gloria, just stay in your seat." Tom looked from one to the other. "I wish I didn't have to do this. I wish anyone else in the world could do it. I wish . . . "

"What's your problem, Tom?" Don's smile was open, bewildered.

"Don, it's time to quit playing around. We've come to take you and Gloria in."

Gloria gasped and bit her knuckles, while Don paled and thrust himself deeper into the chair.

"Why, what makes you think we did it?"

"Quite a few things, Don."

"Tom," Gloria whined, "you know neither one of us would harm Gail, not for the world."

Tom looked at her solemnly. "It's no use, Gloria," he said. "For instance: you didn't hurt your ankle by tripping over a hose, did you? You hurt it when you lost your shoe, at Patio Beach."

Defeated, Gloria let tears well up into her eyes. She looked across the room at Don for guidance.

"Just hold on to yourself, Gloria," he said to her. "Tom's chasing shadows, trying to frame us for Gail's murder. Whatever this is about a shoe, there's thousands like it, whether you

have that kind or not. Listen, Tom; you've known me for a long time. Have I ever lied to you, for any reason?"

"No, Don, you haven't."

"All right, Tom, listen to me. Neither Gloria nor I had anything to do with Gail's death. Thats the honest truth, so help me."

Tom studied Don carefully, without answering, while Gloria and Don watched anxiously for his reaction. At last, Tom sighed heavily and turned to the Marshal, shaking his head.

"So far as I know, he never committed murder before, either, Marshal," he said. He looked at Don with disgust and revulsion, then added, "You can make your arrest; these two murdered Gail Morgan."

Neither of the Corwins was able to say a word for the first few seconds after this announcement. Then Gloria looked at Don. "You said this would be absolutely safe," she spat. "No possible way we could be connected with it. Well, smart man, what do we do now?"

Don shrugged. He looked in puzzlement at Tom. "I don't understand; how did we fail?"

"Gloria's shoe was the thing that made the other indications fit together. There was Gail, suddenly shedding all her boy friends; her despondent period when she got hold of the sleeping pills, thinking of suicide.

Those facts became more understandable when I got the autopsy report. But Gail wasn't a quitter. She would have happily married the father of her child — if he had been Hauk, Matkor, or Black. But none of them were responsible, were they, Don?"

Don hung his head. "That happened while Gloria was up at Bethesda. Gail came over to spend the evening a couple of times, and it seemed so natural, we just got carried away. Gloria found out, of course, and naturally raised hell. I didn't know what to do at first, then Gloria said everything would be all right if Gail would just give us her baby. Gail wouldn't hear of it. She insisted I divorce Gloria and marry her. We argued about it for weeks, until Gail figured she had us beat, by threatening a support suit. Well, of course, I couldn't afford either a divorce or a support suit; I had my career to think of. Last night was our final effort. We picked Gail up in front of her apartment, right after she left Hauk. I drove around for a while, until we saw it was no use. Then we got desperate, and took her to the beach."

"All right, Don. You better go along with the Marshal now, and make your statements formally."

The Admiral and Captain Forrest were relaxing over coffee in the Admiral's austere office when Tom went in to report.

"Well, Flynn," the Admiral said, waving toward the coffee pot, "you seem to have justified my confidence in you."

"Thank you, sir. I'd be happier about it myself, if I hadn't had to order the arrest of one of my best friends, though."

"Of course. Still, aside from that aspect, it sounds as if you were very lucky, Flynn," the Admiral commented.

Tom smiled wryly. "Sir, if it weren't for these flashes of luck, I'd never have gotten the damned reputation that put me into this job. I could do with a little less luck, so I could get back to submarine duty."

"You're just being modest, Flynn. Now, what was it all about? Why did they do it?"

"Their statements are pretty complete, sir. It was Gail's fault, though she never intended it to end in murder. She had held a grudge against Gloria all her life, because Gloria always ended up with best of everything. She was very patient, though. She figured that, sooner or later, she'd have her chance to get back at Gloria for a lifetime of slights. It came when Gloria went up for her physical examination. While Gloria was gone, Gail set out to take Don back from Gloria by any means she could. Her intent was to create tensions between Don and Gloria that would make their marriage misery for both of them. She got carried away by her own plan, though, and it backfired on her. Actually, it led directly to murder, through Gloria's old habit of wanting everything of Gail's."

The Admiral frowned. "I don't understand, Flynn."

"Well, sir, one of the things Don had to face up to when Gloria returned was the results of her examination. I had almost forgotten it, but a few weeks ago, over some drinks at the Echoasis, Don had told me the outcome. You see, Admiral, Gloria had learned at Bethesda that she could never have children."

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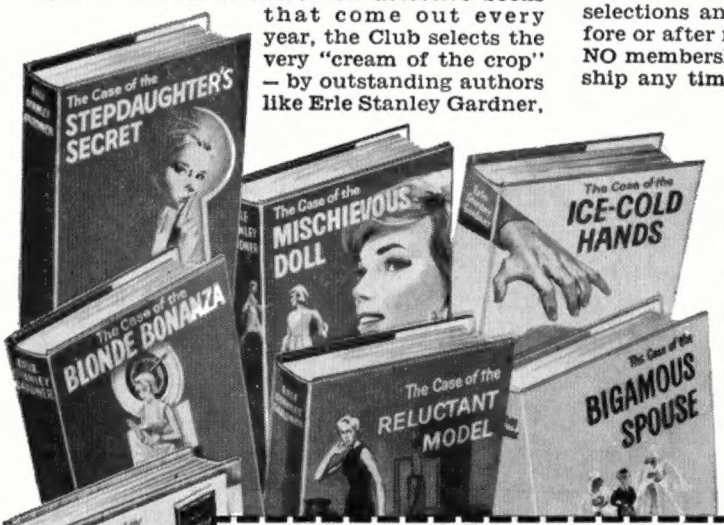

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